

HIDDEN IN PLAIN SIGHT: SIGNS OF GREAT POWER WAR

BY

MAJ PATRICK J. KENNEDY, USAF

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APPROVAL

The undersigned certify that this thesis meets master's-level standards of research, argumentation, and expression.

THOMAS A. HUGHES, PhD

(Date)

STEPHEN E. WRIGHT, PhD

(Date)



DISCLAIMER

The conclusions and opinions expressed in this document are those of the author. They do not reflect the official position of the US Government, Department of Defense, the United States Air Force, or Air University.



ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Major Patrick Kennedy is a 2003 distinguished graduate of the US Air Force Academy. He graduated from Euro-NATO Joint Jet Pilot Training, NATO's Tactical Leadership Programme, and the US Air Force Weapons School. Maj Kennedy has completed multiple operational tours in the F-16 as an instructor pilot. He holds advanced degrees from the USAF Air Command and Staff College and the School of Advanced Air and Space Studies.



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ABSTRACT

This thesis analyzes the origins of World War I and today's US-China relationship within a worldview consisting of four factors that increase the risk of great power war. Prior to World War I, four signposts were prevalent—a hegemonic challenger, a power imbalance, a series of repeated crises, and entangling alliances. These signposts made great power war more likely during the 1914 July Crisis. Nuclear weapons, a different international order, and geography are clear differences in this historical analogy. However, the four basic factors are evident in today's Asian-Pacific region. A worldview that ignores the increased risk of great power conflict will leave leaders with strategic blind spots and, ultimately, failure. Great power conflict has not gone away.



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Introduction

Is Great Power War Approaching?

One crucial question for US strategists today is whether or not the United States is approaching a great power war—especially an immense, costly war that could change the international system as we know it. Since Thucydides, possibilities and probabilities of great power war have inspired contemplation about international relations. Across time, there have been strategically important war signals leading up to the deliberate infliction of violence. Looking at the twentieth century’s first great power conflict, World War I (WWI), this paper explores certain variables that made conflict more likely, and then uses those variables to clarify strategic contours in the complex international relationship between the United States and China today.

This paper springs from a basic assumption: intelligent and purposeful application of historical lessons has a use for today’s decision-makers. This thesis holds two strategic cautions: first, existing parallels between the origins of World War I and the modern Asia-Pacific region have strategic implications; and two, contextual differences between 1914 and today should be understood and identified to avoid misapplying historical analogies. The paper concludes that the risk of major war exists, but its eventuality is not inevitable, particularly if leaders take to heart a few strategic cautions.

Great power war has three primary attributes.¹ During a great power war, all of the great powers in the region are involved, the wars are high-intensity fighting that requires full military mobilization, and states could be eliminated as sovereign nations.² Thus, great power wars can change the international order and involve a large degree of military

¹ Dale C. Copeland, *The Origins of Major War* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University, 2000), 3.

² Copeland, *The Origins of Major War*, 3.

application of force. A look to history is critical for understanding the factors that lead to great power wars.

The Profit and Pitfalls of History

Everyone is a historian, and history can provide many insights for leaders. Every person relies on memories and experiences to problem-solve. People want to make sense of complicated environments, and the past can help with this endeavor. National leaders should utilize history not only to comprehend current circumstances but also to understand potential adversaries and possible futures.

While history can be very helpful, one can misapply history with dangerous result. Context matters for decision-makers and misapplied historical analogies can lead to inappropriate insights. Decision-makers should realize they could draw historical insights carefully or poorly. It is quite normal to use the past to gain insight, but decision-makers need to acknowledge the primary pitfalls of analogous thinking to gain proper strategic insight.

Most importantly, analogies can lead decision-makers into searching for confirming evidence while ignoring ambiguities or disagreeable evidence, a detriment Yuen Foong Khong called “top-down or ‘theory-driven’ processing.”³ In *Perception and Misperception in International Politics*, Robert Jervis warned about this flaw. Jervis argued people have a tendency to draw inferences from history and then fit new information into those beliefs.⁴

People may ignore information that does not confirm their existing beliefs, which can lead to a self-defeating blindness.⁵ To avoid such pitfalls, this paper will not only highlight similarities between 1914 and

³ Yuen Foong Khong, *Analogy at War: Korea, Munich, Dien Bien Phu, and the Vietnam Decisions of 1965* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1992), 37.

⁴ Robert Jervis, *Perception and Misperception in International Politics* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1976), 143.

⁵ Jervis, *Perception and Misperception in International Politics*, 172.

today, but also acknowledge contextual differences between the origins of WWI and the conditions that exist today in Sino-American relations.

There are parallels between the factors that led to WWI in Europe and the Asian-Pacific region today. There are also contextual differences between the two. Strategists can compare these two periods to gain insights. While this paper acknowledges the pitfalls of historical analogies, decision-makers can and should still look to history for understanding.

Variables that Increase the Risk of Great Power War

Leaders must understand why great powers move from relatively peaceful interactions to military action for political interests. The period before the outbreak of war is immensely important because decision-makers may be able to take proactive steps in order to avert war. This assumes that states face choices, and if these leaders knew what factors increase the likelihood of great power war, they could act in a more informed manner.

The prewar juncture shares important characteristics that have the unique opportunity advance peace. The most important feature of prewar relations is that the states are at peace. Political leaders make choices that initiate war. There are factors presented in this thesis that can aid political leaders in realizing the power disparities that can manifest incentives to go to war. Major prewar junctures are rare strategic moments when leading states, or great powers, face a choice on whether to keep peaceful relations or initiate military action.⁶

This paper will focus on four main common variables between the origins of WWI and today's US-China relationship and will address three main differences. There are four striking similarities between 1914 and

⁶ This concept of strategic junctures that are important timeframe to for leaders to make decisions comes from G. John Ikenberry's *After Victory*. G. John Ikenberry, *After Victory: Institutions, Strategic Restraint, and the Rebuilding of Order After Major Wars* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2001), 3-4.

today: first, the presence of a hegemonic challenger, or a fluctuation in the balance of power; second, the existence of a power imbalance; third, a history of repeated crises; and last, in both instances, the existence of entangling alliances. While the situation surrounding the July Crisis of 1914 is similar to today, there are three glaring differences between the two time periods: one, nuclear weapons have brought deterrence to the fore; two, an international order is now dominated by liberal institutions; and three, great geographical differences are present. Despite these differences, however, the similarities provide a useful comparison for leaders to navigate today's world without sparking a prolonged, deadly war. This paper will now explain how these variables originated.

The Origins of the Variables

The variables for this paper originated from multiple strands of realism and international relations theory. The first variable, a hegemonic challenger, comes from Robert Gilpin's hegemonic stability theory.⁷ The theory contends that hegemons promote international cooperation. As a hegemon's power peaks, a hegemon will face a struggle over priorities for protection, consumption, and investment. Challengers will emerge that have different interests and threaten the status quo; when the status quo is threatened, the risk of war increases. This leads to the second variable, a power imbalance.

States are more likely to initiate war when they believe they can win. John Mearsheimer discussed the concept of power asymmetries in his book *The Tragedy of Great Power Politics*.⁸ Mearsheimer argued hegemonic challengers with the capability to push for supremacy would do so because they have an incentive to rule their region in ways they see

⁷ Robert Gilpin, *War and Change in World Politics* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 186-210. John Mearsheimer calls hegemonic challengers "potential hegemons." John J. Mearsheimer, *The Tragedy of Great Power Politics* (New York, NY: W. W. Norton & Company, 2014), 344.

⁸ Mearsheimer, *The Tragedy of Great Power Politics*, 341-343.

fit.⁹ The power imbalance variable also adds Gilpin's notion that states utilize cost-benefit analysis to determine ways to advance national interests.¹⁰ This cost-benefit analysis leads into the third variable, which concerns decision-maker's perceptions.

A history of repeated crises is the third variable, and at its core, this factor deals with how decision-makers may be predisposed to fear another state. Great powers anticipate danger and fear rivals, and these repeated crises could compound these emotions.¹¹ A history of negative interactions between states could create animus expectations, which make it difficult for leaders to consider positive future alternatives.¹² Robert Jervis explained in *Perception and Misperception in International Politics* that people see what they expect to see.¹³ In fact, people may ignore information if it does not fit within their beliefs. Moreover, Jervis explained firsthand experience could provide powerful reinforcement to perceptions.¹⁴ If decision-makers remember or experience firsthand negative interactions with a potential hegemon, they are more likely to harbor fear over their rival's intentions.

The fourth variable, entangling alliances, stems from realism as well. In international anarchy, states may have to pursue alliances to enhance their prospect for survival.¹⁵ In *Theory of International Politics*, Kenneth Waltz argued, "states will ally with the devil to avoid the hell of military defeat."¹⁶ States tend to form alliances because of fear from rivals.

⁹ Mearsheimer, *The Tragedy of Great Power Politics*, 345.

¹⁰ Gilpin, *War and Change in World Politics*, 50.

¹¹ Mearsheimer, *The Tragedy of Great Power Politics*, 32.

¹² Jervis, *Perception and Misperception in International Politics*, 145.

¹³ Jervis, *Perception and Misperception in International Politics*, 145.

¹⁴ Jervis, *Perception and Misperception in International Politics*, 243.

¹⁵ Kenneth N. Waltz, *Theory of International Politics* (1979; repr., Long Grove, IL: Waveland Press, Inc., 2010), 166.

¹⁶ Waltz, *Theory of International Politics*, 166.

The variables' origins fit soundly in a realist perspective, and each factor represents a symptom of Thucydides' origins of great power conflict: fear, honor, and interest. States will accept an increased risk of war to drive certain political aims. Each of these variables has importance as a risk indicator for great power war, and the following sections describe each in detail.

Hegemonic Challenger

A hegemonic challenger is a revisionist state wishing to shift the balance of power in its favor. A current status quo power seeks to keep the status quo that supports its honored place at the top. In *War and Change in World Politics*, Robert Gilpin argued a hegemonic challenger can be destabilizing because as states rise in power, their cost-benefit analysis to go to war can become more favorable.¹⁷ Current hegemons may come to fear the transition of a new great power hegemony. As one power sees its power decreasing and another is rising, fear can result.

Thucydides described the fear of a hegemonic challenger when he described what caused the Peloponnesian War. "What made the war inevitable," he wrote, "was the growth of Athenian power and the fear which this caused in Sparta."¹⁸ The Spartans perceived the Athenian challenger because its relative decline caused fear. Thucydides identified a core problem with a hegemonic challenger: the balance-of-power shift caused stress. The Athenian challenger, with its growth and resultant naval power increase, created fear and insecurity for Sparta—the established land power. An attractive response to a state's relative decline and its associated fear could be to eliminate the source of the perceived problem by military force, as was the case in the Peloponnesian War.¹⁹

¹⁷ Gilpin, *War and Change in World Politics*, 186-187.

¹⁸ Thucydides, *The Landmark Thucydides: A Comprehensive Guide to The Peloponnesian War*, ed. Robert B. Strassler and trans. Richard Crawley (New York, NY: Free Press, 2008), 16.

¹⁹ Gilpin, *War and Change in World Politics*, 191.

A rising power will seek to change the international order to suit its needs. As the dominant power seeks the status quo, it counters “this challenge through changes in its policies.”²⁰ For Gilpin, the “historical record reveals that if [the dominant power] fails in this attempt, the disequilibrium will be resolved by war.”²¹ The rise and fall of great powers is nothing new, and this cycle repeats many times in history. As G. John Ikenberry noted, “Over the centuries, the actors on the global stage have changed but the scripts and plot lines of struggle over order have appeared and reappeared many times.”²² In those shifts, great danger for war exists.

Power Imbalance

A power imbalance can create a dangerous condition whereby a state calculates the cost-benefit analysis of going to war and believes there are more benefits than costs associated with war. Generally, there must be a power imbalance between great powers, coupled with a sense conflict cannot be resolved absent violence, for great power war to occur.²³

Using the Peloponnesian War once more, the Spartans initiated military action while they believed they still had the power to crush their Athenian rival. Sparta’s leaders believed they had the power necessary to win a war against the Athenians. Conversely, Thucydides, an Athenian, believed Athens would win the Peloponnesian War.²⁴

A rising power is clearly not a new development in history, and every time a state declines in power does not mean that war is imminent. In particular, a state whose relative power has declined and does not have enough power to win a great power war will not risk major war—

²⁰ Gilpin, *War and Change in World Politics*, 187.

²¹ Gilpin, *War and Change in World Politics*, 187.

²² G. John Ikenberry, *Power, Order, and Change in World Politics* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2014), 1.

²³ Mearsheimer, *The Tragedy of Great Power Politics*, 341-343.

²⁴ Thucydides, *The Landmark Thucydides*, 3.

though a still powerful state may initiate war-provoking actions to preserve the status quo.²⁵ Additionally, a succession of hegemonies can be a peaceful transition, like the Great Britain and the United States since the Industrial Revolution transitioning hegemonic powers.²⁶

Complicating the cost-benefit analysis is the fact that great power war is far more complicated than a simple state versus state clash. Other great powers may form alliances against a declining power in order to avoid being a victim of a preventative war, and declining states must be cautious about the possibility of a long, drawn-out war that will not only be deadly but also economically costly.

History of Repeated Crises

When states begin to have consistently bad interactions, expectations for future tensions start to rise.²⁷ A series of disputes or conflict between great power may challenge the international order, and these negative interactions have reinforcing consequences in the way decision-makers perceive another state's intentions. Because intentions are in the minds of state leaders, it is difficult to exactly measure a rival's intentions.²⁸ However, state leaders begin to build their own perceptions of rivals from experiences.

For example, fifth century B.C. Greece was under a continual war cycle with only a few peaceful breaks, which created animosity between the Athenians and Spartans. While the cost-benefit analysis supported the logic of nearly continuous war because there were immense profits (colonies, land, natural resources, tribute) and huge costs not fighting (risks of enslavement, death, and loss of property), enmity from repeated conflict created the feeling that Athens and Sparta were enemies and war

²⁵ Gilpin, *War and Change in World Politics*, 50.

²⁶ Gilpin, *War and Change in World Politics*, 144.

²⁷ Ikenberry, *Power, Order, and Change in World Politics*, 6.

²⁸ Mearsheimer, *The Tragedy of Great Power Politics*, 363.

between them was inevitable.²⁹ Greek leaders from both sides discussed hostile feelings for their perceived enemies; thus, increasing the risk for future war based on a perceived threat.

Most importantly, if states begin to view another state as hostile after disputes, then the state will be less likely to compromise. As Robert Jervis explained, “When one state sees another as extremely hostile, it is apt to find most compromises on specific issues unattractive. Since the other’s demands are considered illegitimate, having to give in even slightly will be seen as unreasonable.”³⁰ Thus, as states have repeated negative interactions, perceptions of worthless negotiations and animosity begin to linger, and the use of force can seem to be a more attractive option. Over time, prophecies stemming from animosity and fear of conflict can self-fulfilling.

Negotiations can often seem impractical between two states with a history of poor compromises over security or prestige issues. Even if one side modifies its demands, the other side may still refrain from reciprocating the concession.³¹ This could lead to states hardening their positions on certain issues, leaving little room for bargaining. Fear and a tendency to move toward hardline diplomatic stances compound the problem of political miscalculations when there are alliances to consider.

Entangling Alliances

Alliances can appear threatening to other countries, and even Thucydides cautioned against the fear that alliances may create. In the fifth century B.C., Athens and Sparta had a Thirty Years’ Peace, but Corcyra convinced Athens to break this truce and form an alliance whereby the second greatest naval power in Hellas, Corcyra, reinforced

²⁹ David K. Richards, “Thucydides Dethroned: Historical Differences That Weaken the Peloponnesian Analogy,” in *The Next Great War? The Roots of World War I and the Risk of U.S.-China Conflict*, ed. Richard N. Rosecrance et al. (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 2015), 84.

³⁰ Jervis, *Perception and Misperception in International Politics*, 104.

³¹ Jervis, *Perception and Misperception in International Politics*, 104.

Athens.³² Regarding this development, Thucydides wrote, “The growth of the power of Athens, and the alarm which this inspired in Sparta, made war inevitable.”³³ The mere perception of impending war—and the fear of an alliance—made the fulfillment of a war prophecy more likely in the Peloponnese.

Alliances can also pull a country into a war because it can escalate a security competition. John Mearsheimer described alliances as great powers attempting to balance each other. “With balancing,” he wrote, “threatened states seriously commit themselves to containing their dangerous opponent. In other words, they are willing to shoulder the burden of deterring, or fighting if need be, the aggressor.”³⁴ In this way, when a country signs a bilateral or multilateral defense agreement, the action not only signals to the partner country a commitment but also signals to other nations an apparent security competition.

Indeed, rival states may perceive alliances as security threats, especially if countries have repeated negative interactions, which can lead to miscalculations. A nation usually enters an alliance because of a perceived threat, and sometimes-increased fear over the threatening alliance increases the probability of miscalculations.³⁵ Miscalculations can stem from a misperception concerning another state’s resolve, perhaps from the vague articulation of intent or military strategy, or the difficult task of estimating the military strength of an opposing alliance, which can alter cost-benefit analysis calculations.³⁶

President George Washington warned the United States about the danger of permanent alliances in his 1796 Farewell Address.³⁷ For him,

³² Thucydides, *The Landmark Thucydides*, 22.

³³ Thucydides, *The Landmark Thucydides*, 16.

³⁴ Mearsheimer, *The Tragedy of Great Power Politics*, 139, 267.

³⁵ Mearsheimer, *The Tragedy of Great Power Politics* 341, 343.

³⁶ Mearsheimer, *The Tragedy of Great Power Politics*, 344.

³⁷ President George Washington, “Washington’s Farewell Address,” Senate Document No. 106-21, 106th Cong., 2nd sess., 2000, 27, <https://www.gpo.gov/fdsys/pkg/GPO-CDOC-106sdoc21/pdf/GPO-CDOC-106sdoc21.pdf>.

alliances produced a variety of evils, including second-hand enmity and a sense of betrayal.³⁸ Washington implied alliances would entangle great powers into minor conflicts or, worse, a war with another great power. While there could be benefits to alliances, going to war was for him clearly a possible consequence of alliance, a possibility that has not disappeared in all the years since Washington spoke.

Differences

While four similarities between 1914 and today form the bedrock of this thesis, three contextual differences—nuclear weapons, a different international order, and geography—will be addressed by this study. Nuclear weapons were not around in 1914, and this is a crucial contextual variance. The possibility of relatively few weapons blowing up the world has changed the ways states calculate decisions to go to war. Additionally, a shift in the international order occurred between WWI and today.

The classic example of a multipolar system stemming from the Treaty of Westphalia—where multiple states balanced each other through diplomatic means, changing alliances, and conflict—existed on the eve of the First World War.³⁹ The international order shifted after the Cold War due to American liberal hegemony.⁴⁰ In addition, there is also the matter of geography. A European war against neighboring states and a prospective conflict across the Pacific Ocean is very different.

These differences constituted discrepant information for this analogy and are addressed in this paper. As Khong pointed out, it is imperative not to slight or discount discrepant information, and analogies should be challenged by critical thinkers in order to avoid

³⁸ Washington, “Washington’s Farewell Address,” 24.

³⁹ Gilpin, *War and Change in World Politics*, 29. For a discussion on Westphalian logic and evolution, see Hedley Bull, *The Anarchical Society: A Study of Order in World Politics*, 4th ed. (New York, NY: Columbia University Press, 1997).

⁴⁰ G. John Ikenberry, *Liberal Leviathan: The Origins, Crisis, and Transformation of the American World Order* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2011), 239-254.

biased top-down processing.⁴¹ Strategists should, when using historical analogies, use them with care and discrimination.

Two Case Studies and Structure

This paper covers two periods of history: one that led to a major war and one that carries the risk of a major war. The focus is on an analysis of the First World War and the conditions that are present today in US-Chinese relations. While there are clear differences between the two periods, both situations stem from one commonality: fear from a rising state.

The evidence of this paper's main argument is found in chapters one through three. From this evidence, an analysis provides decision-makers implications to aid in strategic understanding in regards to US-Sino relations. The implications build upon current international relations theories, and the thesis synthesizes multiple international relations viewpoints into an integrative argument.

⁴¹ Khong, *Analogy at War*, 221, 227.

Chapter 1

Origins: The First World War

There is no such thing as an inevitable war. If war comes it will be from failure of human wisdom.

Andrew Bonar Law, Former British Prime Minister

The First World War (WWI) was devastating. The war killed millions, drained economies, and tore societies apart. In hindsight, the enthusiasm surrounding the great powers' military mobilizations seem difficult to imagine given the despair that was to follow from a bloody struggle.¹ WWI was much longer and more costly than most people imagined at its outset.² The final actions that sparked the war's start on August 4, 1914, took place less than two months after the assassination of Archduke Ferdinand, but the signposts for the war were in plain sight well before Germany crossed into Belgium. Four signposts—a hegemonic challenger, power imbalance, history of repeated crises, and entangling alliances—were readily apparent. This chapter seeks to understand these origins as a point of departure for an analogous comparison to US-Sino relations today.

Hegemonic Challenger

This section shows how Germany grew as a power and threatened its European neighbors, most notably Britain, France, and Russia. A look at Germany's industrial and military rise shows Germany's growth as a nation. In addition, Germany's *Weltpolitik*—its quest to expand to foreign markets, have more colonial possessions, and operate on a

¹ Barbara W. Tuchman, *The Guns of August* (New York, NY: Presidio Press, 2004), 148-151.

² Field Marshal Moltke the Older did warn of a long struggle in 1890 and 1906. Lord Kitchener also believed the war was going to "take a very long time." Tuchman, *The Guns of August*, 27, 142.

broader world arena—challenged an established balance of power, which put the great powers on a collision course for a great war.³

Germany was the challenging hegemon and Britain's dominant posture in the international order. A quarter century before the outbreak of WWI, Britain controlled roughly 50 percent of European wealth while Germany controlled 25 percent in 1890 (see Table 1).⁴

Table 1: Relative Share of European Wealth, 1890-1913

	1890	1900	1910	1913
Britain	50%	37%	30%	28%
Germany	25%	34%	39%	40%
France	13%	11%	12%	12%
Russia	5%	10%	10%	11%
Austria-Hungary	6%	7%	8%	8%
Italy	1%	1%	2%	2%

Source: This table is from John J. Mearsheimer, *The Tragedy of Great Power Politics*, 71. Mearsheimer's source data comes from Singer and Small, *National Material Capabilities Data*.

The relative increase in wealth from 1890 to 1900 reflects the rise of Germany as compared to Britain. This data shows Germany's industrial might was reaching Britain's relative strength, and Germany was growing strong enough to challenge Britain as a hegemon. In fact, Germany surpassed Britain in 1903 when its wealth reached 36.5

³ Hew Strachan, *The First World War* (New York, NY: Penguin Books, 2005), 37-38, and Christopher Clark, *The Sleepwalkers: How Europe Went to War in 1914* (New York, NY: HarperCollins Publishers, 2013), 151.

⁴ "Wealth here is a straightforward composite indicator that assigns equal weight to iron/steel production and energy consumption." The percentage shows the "total amount of iron/steel that all the great powers produced for a given year, and then [Mearsheimer] calculated the percentage of that total accounted for by each great power. [Mearsheimer] performed a similar calculation for energy consumption." The "wealth" percentage is the average of iron/steel production and energy consumption. John J. Mearsheimer, *The Tragedy of Great Power Politics* (New York, NY: W. W. Norton & Company, 2014), 70-71, 301.

surpassed the United Kingdom's wealth.⁵ Thus, Germany challenged Britain's share of European wealth in the years before WWI.

Germany challenged Britain in military growth as well (see Table 2).⁶ While Britain did not have a large standing army—mostly based upon its geographic status as an island nation—Germany had a standing army large enough and capable enough to classify it as a potential hegemon. In *The Arming of Europe and the Making of the First World War*, David Herrmann noted the “French and German armies dominated the stage in the perceptions of military experts” before World War I.⁷

The French and German armies leading up to the First World War were comparable in size, though there was one key difference that goes beyond the numbers. Unlike the Germans, the French did not train their reserve forces to fight alongside the regular standing army, giving the German army a competitive advantage.⁸ Moreover, the German army’s superior general staff and better heavy artillery gave Germany a moderate qualitative edge over the French army.⁹ With this information,

⁵ This data was computed in the same fashion as the data in Table 1. Mearsheimer, *The Tragedy of Great Power Politics*, 301, 517.

⁶ See Table 2 for war potential numbers. “War potential (referred to in *The Statesman’s Year-Book* as an army’s war footing) represents the total number of men who would be in the army immediately after mobilization; it thus encompasses a country’s active army plus all its reserves, however poorly trained they may be.” The war potential numbers are “only estimates, and they include many reservists who were only partially trained, and sometimes not trained at all. *The Statesman’s Year-Book* does not list a war footing for [Britain]; [Mearsheimer] obtained it by adding the various reserves, militias, and volunteer forces. It does list to the active British army at home and in the empire...A country’s “fighting army” represents the number of men in the army’s fighting units concentrated in the theater of battle and thus immediately available for combat. The distribution of those fighting armies engaged on more than one front in August 1914, is as follows: Austria-Hungary, 1,000,000 in Galicia, 250,000 to invade Serbia; Germany, 1,485,000 to invade France and the Low Countries, 225,000 in East Prussia; Russia, 1,200,000 in Galicia, 600,000 to invade East Prussia.” Mearsheimer, *The Tragedy of Great Power Politics*, 187, 303.

⁷ This is a subjective impression from military experts at the time. “Even in a climate of technological change, armies continued to rely also on subjective impressions for judging military effectiveness, based on martial bearing and perceptions of ‘national character’ that they sought as a means of explaining the performance of troops in the field.” David G. Herrmann, *The Arming of Europe and the Making of the First World War*, (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1996), 112.

⁸ Mearsheimer, *The Tragedy of Great Power Politics*, 302.

⁹ Mearsheimer, *The Tragedy of Great Power Politics*, 302.

it is evident why a rising Germany posed such a threat to its European neighbors.

Table 2: Manpower in European Armies, 1905-1914

	1905		1910		1914	
	Standing army	War potential	Standing army	War potential	Standing army	War potential
Austria-Hungary	386,870	2,580,000	397,132	2,750,000	415,000	1,250,000
Britain	287,240	742,568	255,438	742,036	247,432	110,000
France	580,420	2,500,000	612,424	3,172,000	736,000	1,071,000
Germany	609,758	3,000,000	622,483	3,260,000	880,000	1,710,000
Russia	1,100,000	4,600,000	1,200,000	4,000,000	1,320,000	1,800,000
Italy	264,516	1,064,467	238,617	600,000	256,000	875,000

Sources: This table is from John J. Mearsheimer, *The Tragedy of Great Power Politics*, 187, 303.

Not only did Germany expand its land forces, but also Germany's naval expansion aimed to contest Britain's sea dominance. The naval German expansion was the most tangible element of *Weltpolitik*. Alfred Thayer Mahan's *The Influence of Sea Power upon History*, which argued great powers dependent on the sea should have large navies composed of large ships, influenced Kaiser Wilhelm II to support a naval German program. Wilhelm cabled a writer with the *New York Herald* in 1894: "I am just now, not reading but devouring, Captain Mahan's book; and am trying to learn it by heart...It is on board all my ships and constantly quoted by my Captains and officers."¹⁰

With Wilhelm's affection for a naval fleet, Germany sought to acquire a more robust naval arsenal.¹¹ Wilhelm "became obsessed with

¹⁰ Quoted in Philip A. Crowl, "Alfred Thayer Mahan: The Naval Historian," in *Makers of Modern Strategy: From Machiavelli to the Nuclear Age*, ed. Peter Paret (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1986), 473.

¹¹ Alfred T. Mahan, *The Influence of Sea Power Upon History, 1660-1783* (1890; repr., New York, NY: Cosimo Classics, 2007), 28, 67, Crowl, "Alfred Thayer Mahan," 473, and Clark, *The Sleepwalkers*, 147.

the need for ships to the point where he began to see virtually every international crisis as a lesson in the primacy of naval power.”¹² In 1898 the *Bundestag*—the federal legislative body in Germany—passed its first of five Naval Laws, which permitted German Admiral von Tirpitz to build a seaborne force capable of competing with the Royal Navy.¹³

Germany wanted to be able to use a new navy to escape British coercion and also had “ample reason to believe that they would not be taken seriously unless they acquired a credible naval weapon.”¹⁴ Before this development, the British were accustomed to using a harsh tone with the Germans. For instance, the British Foreign Office’s assistant under secretary, Sir Francis Bertie, used aggressive and harsh language with the acting German ambassador in London, Baron Hermann von Eckardstein.

In their exchange concerning German interests in Africa, Bertie threatened Germany if they intervened: “Should the Germans lay so much as a finger on the Transvaal,” Bertie stated, “the British government would not stop at any step, ‘even the ultimate’ (an unmistakable reference to war), to ‘repel any German intervention.’”¹⁵ Bertie continued his threats, including a naval blockade of Hamburg and Brenan, and warned, “The annihilation of German commerce on the high seas would be child’s play for the English fleet.”¹⁶

The Royal Navy did not passively sit by while the German naval fleet expanded. Between 1906 and 1912, “Britain launched 29 capital ships and Germany launched 17. Naval expenditures in both countries soared to pay for this arms buildup: Germany’s naval budget practically

¹² Clark, *The Sleepwalkers*, 147.

¹³ Clark, *The Sleepwalkers*, 147-148.

¹⁴ Clark, *The Sleepwalkers*, 148.

¹⁵ Quoted in Clark, *The Sleepwalkers*, 149.

¹⁶ Quoted in Clark, *The Sleepwalkers*, 149.

doubled, and Britain's naval estimates increased by over 40 [percent].”¹⁷ Although German warship production could not compete with the British navy, the German navy did not have to gain a comparative advantage over the British; rather, Germany merely needed to challenge British leaders, which made England invest more into its navy.¹⁸

While more subjective in nature, the other aspects of *Weltpolitik* had a revisionist orientation and pushed German national interests. There was, for instance, an increasing theme that Germany was destined to be a global power as illustrated in Prince von Bulow's first speech in the *Reichstag*. The German foreign minister began his 1897 oration with the words: “The days when Germans granted one neighbor the earth, the other the sea, and reserved for themselves the sky, where pure doctrine reigns—those days are over. We see it as our foremost task to foster and cultivate [German] interests.”¹⁹ He concluded his speech with the famous words, “We do not want to put anyone into the shade, but we demand a place for ourselves in the sun.”²⁰ This speech became the ideological foundation for Germany's revisionist orientation, which challenged the status quo. As the prominent Yale professor Paul M. Kennedy argued in his book *The Rise of the Anglo-German Antagonism: 1860-1914*, the issue of Germany's “proper” place in the world was troubling because German industrial growth brought about a quasi-political influence in the region.²¹

¹⁷ John H. Maurer, “The Anglo-German Naval Rivalry and Informal Arms Control, 1912-1914,” *The Journal of Conflict Resolution* 36, no. 2 (June 1992): 284, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/174477>.

¹⁸ Niall Ferguson, *The Pity of War* (New York, NY: Basic Books, 1998), 85.

¹⁹ Bernhard von Bulow, foreign minister, Germany (address, *Reichstag*, Berlin, Germany, 6 December 1897), http://germanhistorydocs.ghi-dc.org/sub_document.cfm?document_id=783.

²⁰ Bernhard von Bulow, *Memoirs of Prince von Bulow*, vol. I, *From Secretary of State to Imperial Chancellor: 1897-1903*, trans. F. A. Voigt (Boston, MA: Little, Brown, and Company, 1931), 224.

²¹ Paul M. Kennedy, *The Rise of the Anglo-German Antagonism: 1860-1914* (1980; 3rd printing, Atlantic Highlands, NJ: The Ashfield Press, 1990), 469-470.

In the years prior to WWI, European states increasingly perceived Germany to be a challenge to the balance of power that existed in the region. Even with economic interconnectivity, the international community saw Germany as a threat to the international order. “So far as the British and German governments were concerned, the 1914-18 conflict was essentially entered into because the former power wished to preserve the existing status quo whereas the latter, for a mixture of offensive and defensive motives, was taking steps to alter it.”²² The rise of Germany was directly proximate to the start of WWI.

Power Imbalance

This section shows that German decision-makers calculated a power imbalance in which they believed they could win a great power war. German statesmen believed the benefits of going to war outweighed the costs of peace when they crossed the Belgium border in 1914. Germany saw that Britain would not remain neutral, feared Russia’s growth, and began to believe that a general war was looming. With the possibility of a general war, German leaders began a cost-benefit analysis of the consequences of war, and for them, the issue became not whether, but rather when, to engage in war.

German leaders started their calculations by seeing if Britain would agree to a pledge of neutrality. In early 1912, the British war minister, Lord Richard Haldane, traveled to Berlin to meet with the Chancellor of the German Empire, Theobald von Bethmann Hollweg, to discuss Germany’s naval program. During Haldane’s trip, Hollweg offered a neutrality arrangement concerning great power war. In essence, a de facto non-aggression pact.²³

Hollweg used this offer to determine whether Britain needed to be included in Germany’s cost-benefit calculations of war. The Anglo-

²² Kennedy, *The Rise of the Anglo-German Antagonism*, 470.

²³ Ferguson, *The Pity of War*, 71.

German détente ultimately failed.²⁴ However, it was evident German decision-makers considered a great power war likely by its attempt to get Britain to agree to neutrality. Yet, the British rulers did not want to tie their hands. By April 1912, London officials declared, “Although we cannot bind ourselves under all circumstances to war with France against Germany, we shall also certainly not bind ourselves to Germany not to assist France.”²⁵

From a German perspective, Britain sided with France after seeing England’s anti-German actions in the First Moroccan Crisis of 1904-6 and the Agadir Crisis of 1911. Germany understood it needed to prepare for England to enter a war on the side of France. Sir Edward Grey, the British Foreign Secretary, went so far as to tell Count Lichnowsky, the German Ambassador in London, that “in the event of a war between Germany and the Franco-Russian Alliance, Britain was likely to fight on the side of Germany’s enemies.”²⁶ This was congruent with Britain’s treaty obligation to Belgium in 1912, and Britain would not remain neutral in a great power war because it did not want a hegemonic challenger on continental Europe.²⁷

Kaiser Wilhelm II and other German leaders met on 8 December 1912 to discuss a great power war in what historians have dubbed the “war council.”²⁸ While criticism surrounds the evidence that this war council prepared for a great war a year and a half before WWI, there can be little argument that the event illuminated German political-military decision-making.²⁹ Most importantly, Willhelm II and Germany’s top

²⁴ Kennedy, *The Rise of the Anglo-German Antagonism*, 450-451.

²⁵ Quoted in Kennedy, *The Rise of the Anglo-German Antagonism*, 451.

²⁶ Clark, *The Sleepwalkers*, 329.

²⁷ Tuchman, *The Guns of August*, 143.

²⁸ Herrmann, 179, and John C. G. Rohl, *The Kaiser and His Court: Wilhelm II and the Government of Germany*, trans. Terence F. Cole (1987; repr., Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 165, and Clark, *The Sleepwalkers*, 329.

²⁹ Rohl, *The Kaiser and His Court*, 166, and Clark, *The Sleepwalkers*, 329.

decision-makers would treat England as its enemy in its war preparation measures after the infamous war council meeting.³⁰

Germany's actions following the war council of 1912 demonstrate that its leaders came to believe they had the potential to benefit from war and prepared themselves for military action. In April 1913, military leaders presented the Reichstag Budget Commission with its perceived encirclement by neighboring countries and a low probability of success with Germany's current military readiness.³¹ In response, a new bill was passed in July 1913 that increased the German army from 136,000 to 880,000 men.³² The military warning of an impending threat from neighboring countries helped convince the Reichstag to pass the new funding bill.³³

Economic interdependence did not preclude war preparations. To deal with any negative trade consequences from war, Germany passed a property tax law. Germany taxed landowners, which was once considered taboo.³⁴ With the threat of great power war, economic costs did not outweigh national security objectives. States intent on revising existing order will seek ways to pay for war.

As a result of all this, Germany enjoyed a short period of comparative advantage in 1914 when for a number of reasons it believed it could win a great power war. First, Germany implemented its military improvements quicker than its opponents.³⁵ Second, the Germans calculated that they could utilize the Schlieffen Plan—the military plan to

³⁰ Just because Germany planned to have England join an alliance against them in war does not mean that the Germans would stop trying to achieve England's neutrality. As late as the July crisis, Germany would still attempt to secure it. Rohl, *The Kaiser and His Court*, 185.

³¹ Clark, *The Sleepwalkers*, 330-331.

³² Clark reports the German army strength as 890,000 and Mearsheimer reports it as 880,000. Clark, *The Sleepwalkers*, 331, and Mearsheimer, *The Tragedy of Great Power Politics*, 303.

³³ Herrmann, *The Arming of Europe and the Making of the First World War*, 190.

³⁴ Herrmann, *The Arming of Europe and the Making of the First World War*, 190.

³⁵ Clark, *The Sleepwalkers*, 331-332.

attack both Russia and France. Germany believed the Schlieffen Plan was now numerically feasible to defeat the French before Russia could attack.³⁶ Third, Germans had a qualitative superiority due to the high state of development of its army, and Germany was the richest in technical equipment, especially heavy artillery.³⁷ While these factors were quickly swept away after the start of the war, they factored heavily into pre-war calculations of the costs and potential outcome of war. David Hermann concluded in his analysis of military strengths that between “1904 and 1914 a major change came about in the way European statesmen perceived military power...and Germany had a variety of individual rivals, over which it enjoyed a period of appreciable military superiority.”³⁸ Thus, Germany believed the benefits of war outweighed its costs.

History of Repeated Crises

This section examines the last three major European crises along with two minor crises (the First and Second Balkans Crises). The benefit of the major crises is that most, if not all, the Great Powers were involved in the conflicts. The minor crises in this analysis help show the importance of building animosity between regional rivals, which can spark great power war.

The First Moroccan Crisis of 1904-1906 pitted Germany and France against each other.³⁹ For background, most European countries recognized the “status quo” of Morocco—the “Pearl of North Africa.”⁴⁰

³⁶ The Schlieffen Plan began with an invasion of France via Belgium that was supposed to take only six weeks to complete, and then Germany planned to fight Russia. Tuchman, *The Guns of August*, 23; Kennedy, *The Rise of the Anglo-German Antagonism*, 448; and John Keegan, *The First World War* (New York, NY: Alfred A. Knopf, Inc., 1998), 28-33.

³⁷ Herrmann, *The Arming of Europe and the Making of the First World War*, 221.

³⁸ Herrmann, *The Arming of Europe and the Making of the First World War*, 225.

³⁹ Tuchman, *The Guns of August*, 56.

⁴⁰ Eugene N. Anderson, *The First Moroccan Crisis: 1904-1906* (Chicago, IL: The University of Chicago Press, 1930), 2, 6. The Great Powers were interested in Moroccan natural resources and its strategic location. “Morocco’s geographic situation on the Straits of Gibraltar and on the route to South Africa, her proximity to the French and

France wanted to expand her empire and gain control of Morocco's natural resources even though Germany had similar interests there.⁴¹ Britain, who had signed the Anglo-French Entente in 1904, agreed to let France have Morocco if England could have Egypt.⁴² England wanted Egypt's resources and control of the Suez Canal shipping lanes. In the great power transaction, Germany had its interests in Morocco threatened by stronger states and unsuccessfully intervened in an attempt to keep Morocco an independent state.⁴³ After the Moroccan Crisis, France strengthened its bilateral relations with both Britain and Russia, and Germany felt increasingly isolated and encircled.⁴⁴ Partly as a result, the German military finalized the Schlieffen Plan in 1906.⁴⁵

The Bosnian Crisis of 1908-1909 led to Russian humiliation and a win for Austria-Hungary. The Dual Monarchy wanted to annex Bosnia and Herzegovina for ethnic population control, but knew Russian consent was a requisite for the deal.⁴⁶ Russia accepted the annexation in exchange for a surreptitious three-way deal with Austria-Hungary and

Spanish possessions in North Africa and to Spain made the Sherifian Empire a land coveted by all Powers with Western Mediterranean interests, in particular Great Britain, Germany, France, Spain, and Italy." France saw Morocco as the last colony it wanted in the region. Anderson, *The First Moroccan Crisis*, 3, 5.

⁴¹ Anderson, *The First Moroccan Crisis*, 2-18.

⁴² Anderson, *The First Moroccan Crisis*, 148-149.

⁴³ Anderson, *The First Moroccan Crisis*, 137.

⁴⁴ Anderson, *The First Moroccan Crisis*, 405.

⁴⁵ "The British Foreign Secretary stated in June, 1906, implying an accusation in doing so, 'The Germans do not realize that England has always drifted or deliberately gone into opposition to any Power which establishes a hegemony in Europe.'" Anderson, *The First Moroccan Crisis*, 403.

⁴⁶ Luigi Albertini, *The Origins of the War of 1914*, vol. 1, *European Relations from the Congress of Berlin to the Eve of the Sarajevo Murder*, ed. and trans. Isabella M. Massey (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 1952), 193.

Turkey.⁴⁷ Using Austria's influence on Turkey, Russia hoped for access to the Turkish Straits.⁴⁸

However, Austria reneged on the offer with Russia after considering the negative national security implications. Austria continued with the annexation, yet Russia did not get its passage rights through the straits, even though it coerced Serbia to accept the annexation.⁴⁹ After this crisis, two nationalist organizations formed in Serbia, one of which was the *Ujedinjenje ili Smrt* (Unification or Death)—the group that later had a role in the assassination of Archduke Franz Ferdinand.⁵⁰ In sum, Russia felt deceived because it did not secure passage rights, and Serbia felt betrayed because it lost Bosnia. The net effect, as a result of this crisis, was inflamed relations between Russia and Austria-Hungary.

The Agadir Crisis of 1911 once again pitted Germany against France and featured talks of war.⁵¹ France had sent troops to restore order after an uprising in the Moroccan capital threatened French economic interests.⁵² Having French forces in Morocco was a breach of

⁴⁷ When the Austrian Foreign Minister, Aehrenthal, asked the Russia Foreign Minister, Izvolsky, about the annexation, Izvolsky replied with a question. Izvolsky requested access to the Turkish Straits. Aehrenthal secured permission to get consent from Turkey. However, the Austrian Commander-in-Chief, Conrad von Hotzendorf, stepped in. Conrad von Hotzendorf, “who was anxious to crush Serbia,” told Aehrenthal, “the solution to the Jugoslav problem is to be found only in Serbia and by a bold course, the ultimate aim of which would be the annexation of Serbia.” Consequently, Aehrenthal decided to trick Russia with a skillfully phrased telegram that said, “The Russian Government having raised the question of Constantinople, its surrounding territories and the Straits, we declare ourselves ready, in the event, for a confidential and friendly exchange of views on this topic.” Russia then pressured Serbia to agree to the annexation, while believing the Turkish Straits deal was still possible. Albertini, *The Origins of the War of 1914*, vol. 1, 193-194, 202.

⁴⁸ Albertini, *The Origins of the War of 1914*, vol. 1, 198, 202, 206-207.

⁴⁹ Russia warned Serbia to accept the Austria-Hungary deal. When discussing the deal, the Serbian Foreign Minister said, “The situation for us Serbs is unfortunately very difficult. We must bow to the inevitable. Europe wants quiet, nothing but quiet. We are told that we are in the right but that being in the right is of no use to us.” Misha Glenny, *The Balkans: Nationalism, War and the Great Powers 1804-1999* (New York, NY: Viking Penguin, 2000), 291-292.

⁵⁰ Princip, a future member of the Unification or Death group, would later assassinate Archduke Ferdinand. Glenny, *The Balkans*, 292-293.

⁵¹ Tuchman, *The Guns of August*, 60.

⁵² There was controversy surrounding if there was an actual uprising in Agadir or if France fabricated the situation. Albertini, *The Origins of the War of 1914*, vol. 1, 327.

the agreement that had ended the First Moroccan Crisis.⁵³ Germany warned France not to intervene militarily in Agadir.⁵⁴ Nevertheless, France put military forces inside of Morocco. In response, a German military ship parked off the Moroccan coast.⁵⁵ Britain then used diplomatic means to pacify the situation.⁵⁶ Even though there were talks of war, diplomacy ended the crisis.⁵⁷ Germany reluctantly signed an agreement to allow France to control Morocco in exchange for German acquisition of other African territories.⁵⁸ These historical tensions contributed to extreme nationalism in Britain, France, and Germany, and hatred of foreign nationals increased in each state.

There were two Balkan wars fought in rapid succession in 1912-1913 that involved the Ottoman Empire, Serbia, Bulgaria, Greece, and Montenegro.⁵⁹ One outcome of these Balkan Wars was Austrian leaders perception they could no longer rely upon the Concert of Europe to protect Austria-Hungary's interests.⁶⁰

Austria-Hungary suffered because the Balkans Wars swelled Serbian territory by 100 percent and increased its 2.9 million population to 4.4 million.⁶¹ Austria-Hungary, meanwhile, decreased as a Balkan power and lost prestige among its resident ethnic groups. The results of the First and Second Balkan Wars disfavored Austria, Germany's ally, and in the aftermath, Austria, with a blank check from Germany, helped ensure that the July Crisis in 1914 would grow beyond proportion.⁶²

⁵³ Albertini, *The Origins of the War of 1914*, vol. 1, 327.

⁵⁴ Albertini, *The Origins of the War of 1914*, vol. 1, 327.

⁵⁵ Tuchman, *The Guns of August*, 44, 60.

⁵⁶ Albertini, *The Origins of the War of 1914*, vol. 1, 328.

⁵⁷ Germany did not have a military that it perceived could win a great power war at this time.

⁵⁸ Albertini, *The Origins of the War of 1914*, vol. 1, 330-331.

⁵⁹ Strachan, *The First World War*, 6.

⁶⁰ Strachan, *The First World War*, 7.

⁶¹ Strachan, *The First World War*, 6-7.

⁶² Keegan, *The First World War*, 19.

With built up tensions from repeated crises, the most famous accidental turn and a series of miscalculations ultimately created a scenario where a hegemonic challenger, Germany, believed it had a chance to win a quick, decisive war. On June 28, 1914, Archduke Ferdinand's chauffeur turned down a wrong street and met an armed terrorist.⁶³ Austrian elites decided to hold the Serbian state accountable for the murder. After receiving German reassurances, Austria-Hungary issued Serbia an ultimatum.⁶⁴ Austria-Hungary subsequently declared war on Serbia, despite knowing that Serbia had an alliance with Russia. In retrospect, Germany gave its ally a significant amount of latitude, supporting Austria-Hungary's declaration of war against a country that was openly under the protection of Russia.⁶⁵ This alliance ensured that the July Crisis would turn into a major war when Germany crossed into Belgium.

In sum, the history of repeated crises contextualizes the tension built up over time between great powers. These tensions created a climate of expectation that future conflicts were inevitable, but that the conflicts would not last long. None of the previous conflicts had lasted long, and, in fact, some German leaders, such as Staff Chief Helmuth von Moltke, foresaw a short, decisive war.⁶⁶ Some studies focus only on the July 1914 crisis to examine nations' decisions leading to war because the earlier crises did not result in a great power war. However, great power war often occurs after a sequence of actions becomes a powder keg waiting for a trigger event.

⁶³ Luigi Albertini, *The Origins of the War of 1914*, vol. 2, *The Crisis of July 1914: From the Sarajevo Outrage to the Austro-Hungarian General Mobilization*, ed. and trans. Isabella M. Massey (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 1952), 37.

⁶⁴ Tuchman, *The Guns of August*, 85.

⁶⁵ Albertini, *The Origins of the War of 1914*, vol. 1, 528-529. See also Stephen Van Evera, "The Cult of the Offensive and the Origins of the First World War," *International Security* 9, no. 1 (Summer 1984), 78, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/2538636>.

⁶⁶ At the war council meeting in December 1912, Staff Chief Helmuth von Moltke said, "war is unavoidable and the sooner the better." Quoted in Clark, *The Sleepwalkers*, 329.

Entangling Alliances

Analyzing the European alliance system helps illuminate why European states abandoned their coexistence for violent hostilities. The alliance systems—the Entente Cordiale, the Anglo-Russian Convention, the Franco-Russian Alliance, and the Triple Alliance—that snared the European states was another foundational cause to WWI.

Germany had a bilateral security agreement with Austria. German decision-makers decided to demonstrate support for Austria with a blank check.⁶⁷ While last-minute conversations between Kaiser Wilhelm II of Germany and his cousin Tsar Nicholas II of Russia illustrated that army mobilization did not mean war, Germany was unprepared to tell Austria that it would be on its own if the Russians intervened.⁶⁸ Germany's alliance with Austria linked to its mobilization and intrusion on Belgium's sovereign territory in 1914. The basic logic for this calculation was German leaders believed they had a strategic advantage. One of the outcomes from the 1912 war council was a feeling of an inevitable great war, and the odds of Germany keeping a military advantage would decrease with time.

As a counterweight to the Triple Alliance, England, France, and Russia formed the Triple Entente, which started as a series of bilateral agreements. England, being the European hegemon, did not want a hegemon to form on mainland Europe. England and France signed bilateral agreements called the Entente Cordiale. France also had an agreement with Russia called the Franco-Russian Alliance. Moreover, Russia, coming off its defeat in the Russo-Japanese War, formed an alliance with England called the Anglo-Russian Entente.

⁶⁷ Clark, *The Sleepwalkers*, 415-418.

⁶⁸ Kaiser Wilhelm II of Germany and Tsar Nicholas II of Russia, “The ‘Willy-Nicky’ Telegrams,” 29 July - 1 August 1914 in *The World War I Reader*, ed. Michael S. Neiburg (New York, NY: New York University Press, 2007), 46-49.

What complicated the Triple Entente were additional bilateral commitments outside of the great powers. For example, England underwrote Belgium's security, and Russia committed militarily to Serbia. With bilateral security agreements, England was obliged to defend Belgium and Germany had to calculate Russia's involvement if Austria-Hungary fought Serbia. These security commitments failed to deter WWI and drew multiple great powers into conflicts that they neither sought nor instigated.

These entangling alliances were brought about by a classic example of a security dilemma, which included concerns over sea control. Germany's increased investments in its naval expansion alarmed the British military.⁶⁹ The British ambassador predicted that the German naval increases would bring about war.⁷⁰ Britain was a naval power and freedom of navigation was key to its economy and imperial interests. Germany's naval growth left Britain feeling vulnerable; Germany's encirclement made it feel vulnerable as well. In the end, both countries agreed to security alliances.

The security dilemma also existed on land. By German calculations, Russia had huge potential to field over a million soldiers, and this sheer size "haunted the Germans."⁷¹ Germany felt encircled, so German politicians countered by strengthening their alliance with Austria-Hungary. The European great powers divided most of the continent into a bipolar region, the Triple Alliance, or the Triple Entente, with a few exceptions, such as Belgium. Again, the alliance system created by the elites was not the *sole* cause of the war, but it was a foundational cause that led to WWI's magnitude. Following the July 1914 crisis, politicians were unable to resolve the crisis diplomatically,

⁶⁹ Tuchman, *The Guns of August*, 5.

⁷⁰ Tuchman, *The Guns of August*, 143.

⁷¹ Tuchman, *The Guns of August*, 67.

and Germany saw more benefits than costs associated with executing the Schlieffen Plan.

Ultimately, support of an ally can lead a great power into conflict over interests that would otherwise not be an existential security interest. As this paper argues, alliances can lead to miscalculations. While it may have been difficult to predict losses such as those at the Battle of the Somme that killed over a million men, decision-makers should never neglect the worst-case scenario costs. This thesis does not suppose political elites made their choices lightly during the 1914 July Crisis. Rather, decision-makers should never neglect the worst-case scenario of having a security commitment force them into an unwanted war. Additionally, unforeseen events, like the 1914 Sarajevo terrorist attack, should not mislead leaders into believing war is the *only* answer.

While maintaining alliances was essential, the German decision to support Austria's ultimatum to Serbia could have been different. German decision-makers clearly did not choose an alternative that could maintain an ally and simultaneously de-escalate a crisis. The First World War is an example of how alliance commitments inclusive of great powers drove states to great power war.

Conclusion

War is too serious of a venture to be considered inevitable. Human decision-making in an extremely complex and uncertain environment led to World War I. People must comprehend the contextual environment of a crisis and realize they merge biases into their understanding. All wars seem to have triggering events and underlying causes. During a crisis, decision-makers must anticipate the consequences of their actions and the tensions that may be present from well before they were in leadership positions. Most importantly, decision-makers should not discount the signposts of great power war.

To summarize, there were four interlinked causes to WWI: a hegemonic challenger, a power imbalance, a history of repeated crises,

and entangling alliances. No variable pinpoints the most important cause. However, each factor was apparent, even in the complex environment prior to the 1914 July Crisis. The systemic pressures of having a hegemonic challenger—Germany—drove its neighbors into decisions that made war more likely. Just as Britain was concerned about Germany’s growth, Germany had a reasonable fear about Russia’s latent military strength, with its huge population and landmass. The history of repeated crises and alliance commitments drew great powers closer to war instead of incentivizing peace. In retrospect, Germany’s military calculations of wartime strength may not have been too far off, as it was able to shoulder four years of battles and come dangerously close to winning. However, Germany never foresaw the costs or length of a great power war.

The First World War demonstrated a tragic dimension of international relations. Indeed, some European leaders thought war was inevitable and wanted a decisive battle sooner, rather than later. However, states predicated this urgency to fight on the assumption that future cooperation was unlikely to support national interests. As a result, decision-makers felt trapped between the lesser-of-two-evil choices: 1) war sooner, when the calculated chances of winning were good, or 2) war later, with the ever-changing balance of power calculations. Unpredictable intentions of opponents and allies was an underlying theme among rivals in WWI, and this theme—among others—parallels the current situation in US-Sino relations.

Chapter 2

US-China War Factors

In [Colonel] Liu's view, no matter how much China commits itself to a "peaceful rise," conflict is inherent in US-China relations. The relationship between China and the United States will be a 'marathon contest' and the 'duel of the century.'

Henry Kissinger in *On China*

In his book *On China*, Henry Kissinger argued there are “surely strategic comparisons to be made” between the Anglo-German rivalry and the US-China relationship of the twenty-first century.¹ Many people believe a US-China conflict would be devastating and unwise, but similar warnings expressed in the years before WWI should serve as a bracing reminder of the capacity to enter conflict even in the face of exorbitant human and economic peril.² This chapter explores the relevant parallels for the United States and China today.

Similar variables are at play now as existed over a hundred years ago: a hegemonic challenger, a power imbalance, a history of repeated crises, and entangling alliances. While there are many different frames in which one can view US-China relations, this chapter focuses on the perspective of China as a rising power and the United States as an established power. China has become a near-peer to the United States. While this may not seem like breaking news, the fact that the signposts

¹ Henry Kissinger, *On China* (New York, NY: The Penguin Press, 2011), 514

² Norman Angell and Ivan Bloch both made arguments against war due to the costs of war. Angell argument concentrated on the economic interdependence between the great powers while Bloch warnings concerned the financial, resource, and human costs of war. Ivan S. Bloch, *Is War Now Impossible? Being an Abridgement of the War of the Future in its Technical, Economic and Political Relations* (1899; repr., Brookfield, VT: Gregg Revivals, 1991), and Norman Angell, *The Great Illusion: A Study of the Relation of Military Power to National Advantage*, 4th ed. (New York, NY: The Knickerbocker Press, 1913).

for great power war loom need to be acknowledged and handled appropriately. This chapter does not seek to predict the future, but rather elicit a greater understanding of the highly dynamic nature of today's US-China relationship to guide American policy-makers.

Hegemonic Challenger

This section shows how China has grown as a world power and has the capacity to threaten its neighbors. A look at China's economic and military rise will show its growth. This section will also examine how China's revisionist ambitions challenge the international balance of power.

The world has yet to see if China's economic rise can continue, but its recent material growth has been spectacular and indisputable. As one can see from Figures 1 and 2, China's economy, measured by gross domestic product (GDP), has grown considerably since the start of the 21st century. No matter how China's GDP is measured, China's growth is significant. Because a Chinese Communist Party (CCP) formal decree rather than market forces determines China's exchange rate, the purchasing power parity (PPP) rate is a more accurate assessment of China's economic strength.³ Using the PPP, one sees that Chinese GDP surpassed the US GDP in 2014 (see Figure 1). Without using the PPP and utilizing only official though artificial currency conversions, China's GDP has not yet reached the US GDP, but is rising quicker than any other country in the world (see Figure 2).

³ CIA, "China," *The World Factbook*, 25 February 2016, <https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/geos/ch.html> and The World Bank, *World DataBank*, <http://databank.worldbank.org/data>.

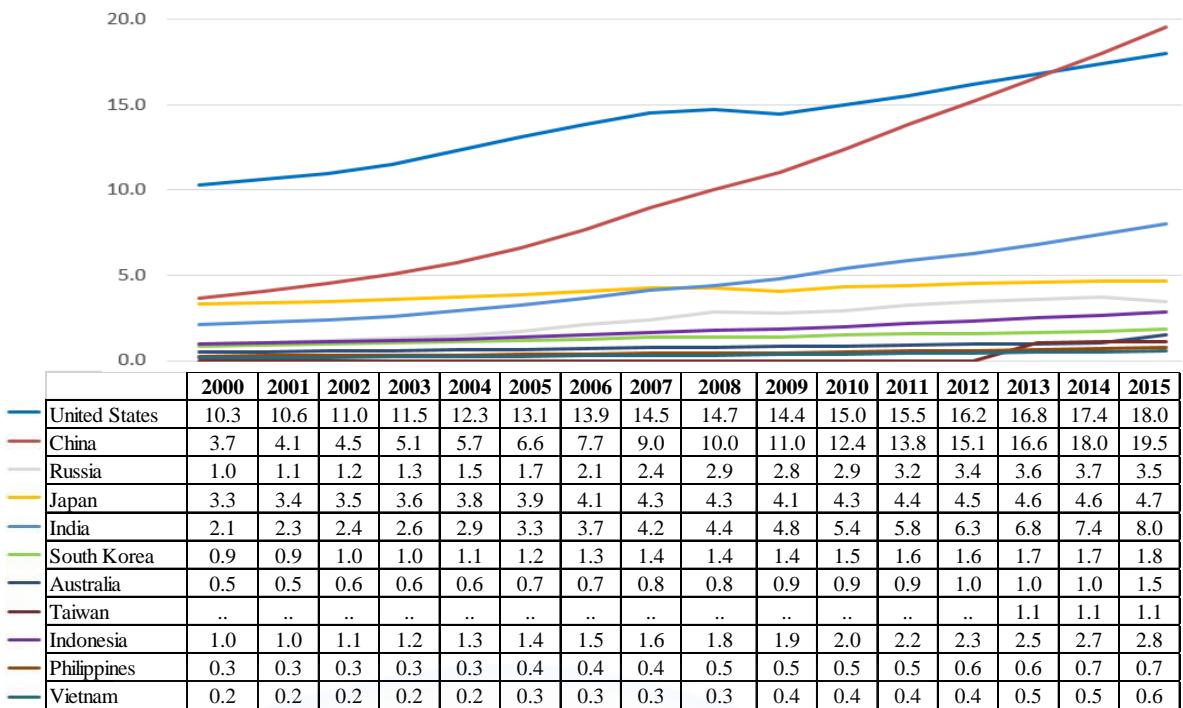


Figure 1: GDP by Country, Purchasing Power Parity Rate Converted To International Dollars (Trillions), 2000-2015⁴

Source: All 2015 figures and Taiwan numbers are from CIA, *The World Factbook*, <https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/geos/vm.html>. All other figures are from The World Bank, *World DataBank*, <http://databank.worldbank.org/> data.

⁴ “..” denotes data is unavailable. Figures are based upon a purchasing power parity rate (PPP) for a country’s gross domestic product (GDP) converted into international dollars. “An international dollar has the same purchasing power over GDP as the US dollar has in the United States. GDP is the sum of gross value added by all resident producers in the economy plus any product taxes and minus any subsidies not included in the value of the products. It is calculated without making deductions for depreciation of fabricated assets or for depletion and degradation of natural resources. Data are in current international dollars. For most economies PPP figures are extrapolated from the 2011 International Comparison Program (ICP) benchmark estimates or imputed using a statistical model based on the 2011 ICP.” CIA, *The World Factbook*, <https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/geos/vm.html>.

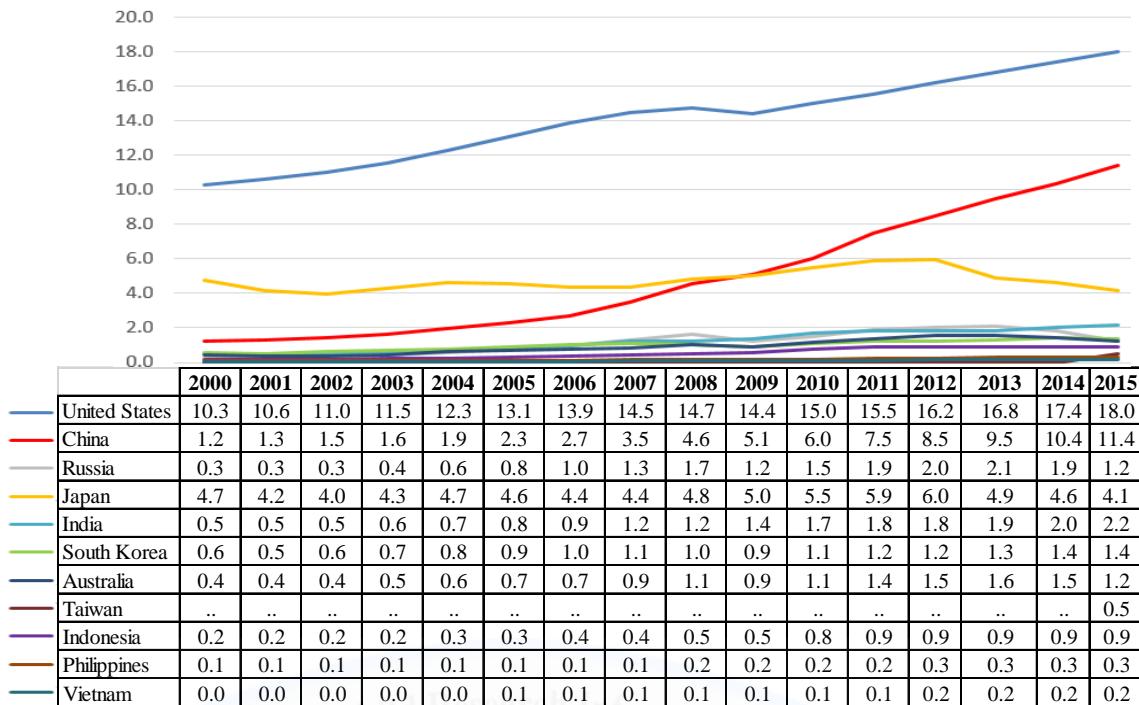


Figure 2: GDP by Country, US Dollars (Trillions), 2000-2015⁵

Source: All 2015 figures are from CIA, “The World Factbook,” <https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/geos/vm.html>. All other figures are from The World Bank, “World DataBank,” <http://databank.worldbank.org/data>.

China’s economic growth has fueled its military modernization program. While US military expenditure has decreased since 2011, Chinese military spending has increased (see Figure 3). China has increased its military budget almost ten-fold since 2000. With this money, China has flown its fifth generation stealth fighter, the J-20, and it maintains a robust fleet of fourth generation fighter aircraft—the J-10, J-11B, and J-15.⁶ While China is working on its competence in joint

⁵ .. denotes data is unavailable. Figures are based upon converted into 2015 US dollars. “GDP at purchaser’s prices is the sum of gross value added by all resident producers in the economy plus any product taxes and minus any subsidies not included in the value of the products. It is calculated without making deductions for depreciation of fabricated assets or for depletion and degradation of natural resources. Data are in current U.S. dollars.” CIA, “The World Factbook,” <https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/geos/vm.html>.

⁶ Phillip C. Saunders and Joshua K. Wiseman, “China’s Quest for Advanced Aviation Technologies,” in *The Chinese Air Force*, ed. Richard P. Hallion et al. (Washington, DC: National Defense University Press, 2012), 314.

warfare and systems integration, “its military aviation industry has accessed the innovations of others via coproduction, espionage, and reverse engineering while making limited developments in genuinely new technology.”⁷ China’s vast economic resources and military spending has given it a “follower’s advantage” that allowed the PLAAF to increase rapidly its military technologies. Indeed, few states other than China have undergone such an extensive modernization and military development in the past 15 years.⁸



⁷ Saunders and Wiseman, “China’s Quest for Advanced Aviation Technologies,” 314. “The PLA has intensified its participation in tri-service exercises—which are called ‘integrated joint operations’ to distinguish them from previous quasi-joint manoeuvres (sic)—and expanded its amphibious force capabilities.” Janes, “China: Army,” Sentinel Security Assessment—China and Northeast Asia, 2 February 2016, <https://janes-ihs-com.aufric.idm.oclc.org/ChinaNorthAsia/Display/1303144>.

⁸ Phillip C. Saunders et al. ed., *The Chinese Navy: Expanding Capabilities, Evolving Roles* (Washington, D.C.: National Defense University Press, 2011), 206.

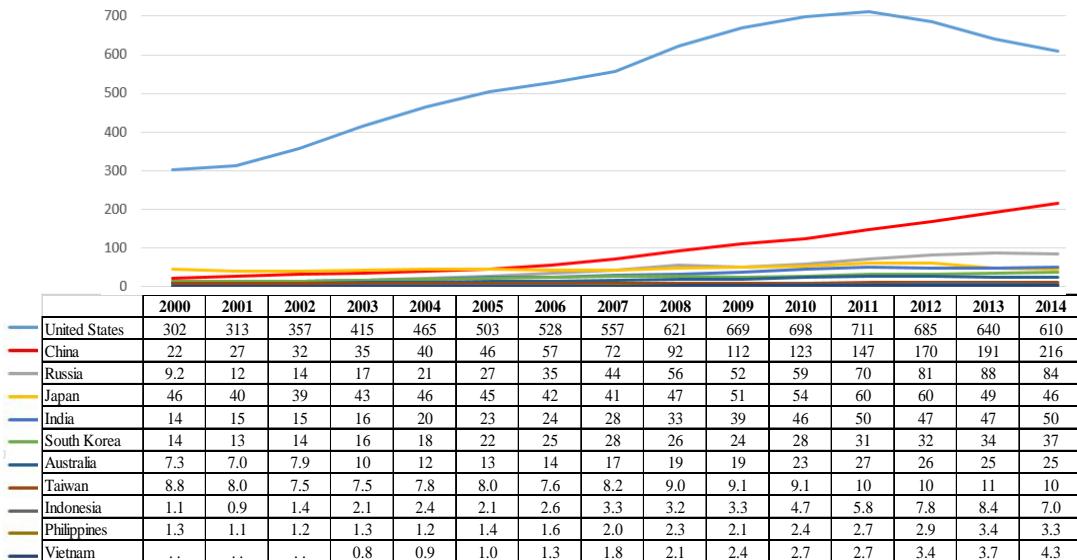


Figure 3: Military Expenditure by Country, US Dollars (Billions), 2000-2014⁹

Source: Stockholm International Peace Research Institute, “SIPRI Military Expenditure Database,” November 2015, http://www.sipri.org/research/armaments/milex/milex_database.

While these numbers are notable, the Chinese Navy holds its submarines as the most important capital ship.¹⁰ This valuation is because submarines are difficult to locate. From 1995 to 2007, China commissioned 38 submarines, although it would take about 60 to 75 submarines to perform a modern day anti-access campaign in the South China Sea.¹¹ Thus, one can expect China to continue to grow its naval forces until it could be confident in its ability to conventionally face the United States at sea.

The worry for China is not only facing the US military in the South China Sea, but also the Indian Ocean. The Indian Ocean, a strategic key to China’s economic future, is a distance challenge for the PLA that will cause CCP leaders to continue their military modernization program.

⁹ “..” denotes data is unavailable. Money is converted for each year based upon that year’s exchange rate.

¹⁰ Saunders, *The Chinese Navy*, 207.

¹¹ Saunders, *The Chinese Navy*, 207-208.

While Chinese leaders believe they can hold the United States at risk in the Pacific, they know they cannot currently project conventional military power against a great power outside the Pacific region.

Along with China’s integrated network electronic warfare (INEW), the PLA has invested heavily in surface-to-air missiles (SAMs) and ballistic missiles, which demonstrate how Chinese leaders invest to win a future war with an ever-widening spectrum of effects. China calls its electronic warfare concept INEW and “relies on a simultaneous application of electronic warfare and computer network operations against an adversary’s command, control, communications, computers, intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance (C4ISR) networks and other essential information systems.”¹²

INEW is supposed to establish information dominance by attacking an enemy’s C4ISR. The requirement for information dominance and information control is “considered so fundamental that *The Science of Military Strategy* considers them a prerequisite for seizing air and naval superiority.”¹³ The PLA’s investment in modern double-digit SAM systems such as the SA-10, SA-20, and SA-20B, along with the PLA’s short, medium, intermediate, submarine-launched, and intercontinental ballistic missile identifies China as a rising hegemonic challenger.¹⁴

While China’s anti-access “system of systems” is vastly more complicated than this essay can cover, the PRC’s military modernization program has helped bring US-Chinese tensions in the Pacific to

¹² Steve DeWeese et al., *Capability of the People’s Republic of China (PRC) to Conduct Cyber Warfare and Computer Network Exploitation*, Report for the US-China Economic and Security Review Commission (McLean, VA: Northrop Grumman, 2009), 7.

¹³ The Science of Military Strategy is one of PLA’s most authoritative public statements on its doctrine for military operations. C4ISR and logistics systems networks are also named in The Science of Campaigns, which is another authoritative doctrinal book. DeWeese, *Capability of the PRC to Conduct Cyber Warfare and Computer Network Exploitation*, 11.

¹⁴ His-hua Cheng, “The Employment of Airpower in the Taiwan Strait,” in *The Chinese Air Force*, ed. Richard P. Hallion et al. (Washington, DC: National Defense University Press, 2012), 328-332.

significant heights. A 2010 Office of the Secretary of Defense report to Congress warned the “pace and scope of China’s military modernization have increased over the past decade, enabling China’s armed forces to develop capabilities...[and] options for using military force to gain diplomatic advantage or resolve disputes in its favor.”¹⁵ The Department of Defense submitted a report on 20 January 2016 from the Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS) concerning the Asia-Pacific region. The CSIS report concluded, “Chinese and North Korean actions are routinely challenging the credibility of US security commitments, and at the current rate of US capability development, the balance of military power in the region is shifting against the United States.”¹⁶

With China’s rise, PRC actions have revisionist-desired outcomes and show China’s desire to influence global affairs to serve its national interest. This is not a new dynamic in international relations. States have interests and seek to advance those interests. However, most states do not have the power and influence to challenge the status quo as China does.

China views current laws and the post-World War II international legal architecture as unfairly biased toward Western interests and sees the present international order as sustaining Western hegemony.¹⁷ In a 2010 book, *China Dream*, PLA Senior Colonel Liu Mingfu argued America emerged from the Second World War as a hegemon and set up an

¹⁵ Office of the Secretary of Defense, “Military and Security Developments Involving the People’s Republic of China, 2010,” *Report to the Congress: Pursuant to the National Defense Authorization Act for Fiscal Year 2010* (Washington, DC: Department of Defense, 2010), I, http://www.defense.gov/Portals/1/Documents/pubs/2010_CMPR_Final.pdf.

¹⁶ Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS), *Asia-Pacific Rebalance 2025: Capabilities, Presence, and Partnerships*. (Washington, DC: CSIS, January 2016), VII, http://csis.org/files/publication/160119_Green_AsiaPacificRebalance2025_Web_0.pdf.

¹⁷ Stefan Halper, *China: The Three Warfares* (Washington DC: Office of Net Assessment, 2013), 373. For a discussion on the post-World War II international order, see G. John Ikenberry, *After Victory: Institutions, Strategic Restraint, and the Rebuilding of Order After Major Wars* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2001).

institutional order to suit its needs, a conclusion not unlike that of G. John Ikenberry's in *After Victory*.¹⁸

China seeks to shape international relations through its "Three Warfares" doctrine. Its authors introduced this strategy in 2003 and the CCP Central Committee and the Central Military Commission subsequently endorsed it.¹⁹ The concept uses non-kinetic forms of influence—legal, media, or psychological—to propagate PRC interests without escalating to kinetic forms of warfare.²⁰ An example of this strategy is the weaponization of its man-made islands in the South China Sea; islands whose very purpose was to convolute legal and international norms over China's disputed territory claims in the South China Sea. China dubbed its island-building activities as benign projects in reclamation and ocean management.

Nonetheless, Chinese leaders are pushing international norms and international law toward a more Chinese-centric version of legitimacy. Presently, this territorial dispute issue is under deliberations at the International Tribunal on the Law of the Sea (ITLOS)—and China is not participating in the proceedings (see Figure 4). China's building of man-made islands in the South China Sea is but one example China's rejection of the post-World War II legal architecture that has governed global affairs. China's on-going construction of alleged radar systems, airstrips, and military communication nodes are another example of how China flaunts established norms in the South China Sea.²¹

¹⁸ Liu Mingfu, *The China Dream: Great Power Thinking and Strategic Posture in the Post-American Era* (New York, NY: CN Times Books, Inc., 2015), 27-28.

¹⁹ The Central Military Commission (CMC) is the "supreme leading organ of the armed forces of the People's Republic of China. It directs and commands the national armed forces." People's Republic of China (PRC) Government, "Central Military Commission," *People's Daily Online*, <http://english.people.com.cn/data/organs/militarycommission.html>, and Halper, *China*, 11.

²⁰ Halper, *China*, 11.

²¹ For imagery and discussion of China's construction of radar sites and communication nodes in the South China Sea, see CSIS, "Asia Maritime Transparency Initiative," 22 February 2016, <http://amtis.csis.org/another-piece-of-the-puzzle>.



Figure 4: China’s Reclamation Work in the Nine-Dash Line

Source: “Construction in the South China Sea,” *The Economist*, 28 Feb 2015, 35, <http://www.economist.com/news/asia/21645268-unprecedented-building-boom-reclamation-marks>.

The timing of great power war is anything but predictable, but revisionist goals divergent from the status quo are likely to increase animosity between the United States against China. In fact, some Chinese leaders are expecting an event that would have China face the United States on its way to achieving PRC goals. PLA Senior Colonel Liu Mingfu’s 2010 *China Dream* defined a national “grand goal” as “when China takes over as world leader,” reestablishing the PRC to its believed rightful place.²² As Mingfu noted, “If China wants to win the global competition, it needs to make its own model more advanced and superior

²² Mingfu, *The China Dream*, 69-73, and 103-117, and Kissinger, *On China*, 506.

to the American one.”²³ In the process, the two global behemoths could collide.

Power Imbalance

Hard power is still a currency that great powers understand, and China and the United States are clearly in a security competition. Dr. Aaron Friedberg, professor and co-director of the Woodrow Wilson School for International Security Studies at Princeton, provided three dimensions that help explain this hard-power rivalry regarding a power asymmetry. Friedberg reasoned China has built a network to stop US military force projection; the PRC attempts to decrease the credibility of US nuclear weapons and their use; and China employs asymmetric approaches to limit the US Navy’s maritime dominance.²⁴

Power projection is paramount to the US credibility in Asia. The area is, after all, a great distance from American shores. The United States has many relationships that rely on US security guarantees, and China recognizes this fact. One of the uses of China’s anti-access systems is to counter the United States’ capacity to operate or logistically resupply its forces in the Pacific among its allies in the region. If Chinese leaders can bring doubt to the American ability to defend her allies, deter adversaries, and freely navigate in the Pacific, then China could shift the regional power balance in its favor.²⁵ In this way, China can change the strategic balance of power in the region without ever fighting—the acme of skill according to Sun Tzu.

In fact, the balance of power may have already shifted to one less favorable to the United States. In the 1990s, America was able to send carriers into the Taiwan Straits without fear of Chinese retaliation, as the PLA lacked the capability to acquire timely intelligence off its shores. At

²³ Mingfu, *The China Dream*, 73.

²⁴ Aaron L. Friedberg, *A Contest for Supremacy: China, America, and the Struggle for Mastery in Asia* (New York, NY: W.W. Norton and Company, 2011), 215.

²⁵ Friedberg, *A Contest for Supremacy*, 217.

the time, “the United States was close to all-seeing while China was effectively blind, an asymmetry that would likely have been decisive in determining the outcome of any conflict between them.”²⁶

Present day situational awareness is more balanced. China has its space assets for imagery, signals intelligence, communication, and navigation.²⁷ With China’s modernization program of space-based assets and over-the-horizon capabilities, the PLA Navy (PLAN) can track and target surface ships.²⁸ According to some reports, “the Chinese navy has also begun to install a network of under-water listening devices designed to help it locate approaching American submarines.”²⁹

China not only has the ability to track targets at range, but the PLA can also attack them. The PLA can launch massive missile attacks against Taiwanese and/or Japanese defense networks. The PLA has also invested heavily in cyber systems (INEW) to disrupt command and control networks. Clearly, the Chinese improved their ability to launch strikes in the Pacific region and would attempt to disrupt US operations if a conventional war ever took place. China’s increased military capability, similar to Germany’s relative weaponry advancements in 1914, is shifting the power imbalance between the United States vis-à-vis China.

China closed the gap in its nuclear posture and established a nuclear deterrent. Jane’s Sentinel Security Assessment reported China

²⁶ Friedberg, *A Contest for Supremacy*, 218.

²⁷ Erik Seedhouse, *The New Space Race: China vs. the United States* (Chichester, UK: Praxis Publishing, 2010), 1-10.

²⁸ Friedberg, *A Contest for Supremacy*, 219.

²⁹ Friedberg, *A Contest for Supremacy*, 219, and “China’s progress in acquiring over-the-horizon radars, satellites, and unmanned aerial vehicles is described in Office of the Secretary of Defense, Annual Report to Congress, Military and Security Developments Involving the People’s Republic of China, 2010, 2, 7, 33, http://www.defense.gov/pubs/pdfs/2010_CMPR_Final.pdf. Regarding the possible development of a Chinese undersea surveillance system see Bill Gertz, “Inside the Ring,” Washington Times, May 9, 2008, 6. The Gertz piece is cited in Ronald O’Rourke, *China Naval Modernization: Implications for U.S. Navy Capabilities—Background and Issues for Congress* (Washington, D.C.: Congressional Research Service, 2008), 30-31.” Friedberg, 330-331.

has 25 DF-31As, which are nuclear-capable intercontinental ballistic missiles (ICBM) with a range that could reach the continental United States.³⁰ The PLAN also has JL-2 (CSS-N-4) nuclear-capable missiles that launch from submarines and have a 7,400 km range.³¹ Twelve JL-2s are loaded on each Type 94 submarine, of which China has a reported four.³² With China's larger and more effective nuclear force, the balance of power has shifted over the past few decades. "The impending loss of any semblance of a meaningful nuclear advantage, coinciding as it does with the growing challenge to America's ability to project conventional power into the Western Pacific," shifts the cost-benefit analysis of wartime calculations.³³

One important historical point concerning power imbalance is that China has shown a propensity in past conflicts to strike even when the odds were seemingly for their adversary.³⁴ Mark Burles and Adam Shulsky, two RAND researchers, argued that China does not use force based on a simple cost-benefit analysis. China sometimes resorts to violence to show resolve, toughness, and gain a powerful bargaining chip. The PLA took the initiative to strike first in four prior military surprise attacks: the US forces in Korea (1950), India (1962), Russia (1969), and Vietnam (1979).³⁵ While the balance of power appears to favor the

³⁰ Jane's, "China: Strategic Weapon Systems," 3 March 2016, <https://janes-ihs-com.aufric.idm.oclc.org/Janes/Display/1303170>.

³¹ Jane's, "China: Strategic Weapon Systems."

³² "The PLAN now has four Type 094 SSBNs in service, all based at the Yalongwan (Yalong Bay) Naval Base at Sanya on Hainan Island (the 2nd Nuclear Submarine Base). This base is devoted to nuclear submarines, putting them closer to southern areas of strategic concern. Basing Type 094 SSBNs in Hainan indicates a desire to ensure a nuclear "second-strike" capability against India, as well as possible southern hemisphere strike options against the United States that would complicate the latter's missile defences. The size of this underground base is unknown, although it is large enough to hold up to 20 submarines." Jane's, "China: Strategic Weapon Systems."

³³ Friedberg, *A Contest for Supremacy*, 227.

³⁴ Friedberg, *A Contest for Supremacy*, 248.

³⁵ A surprise here means tactical surprise and does not denote strategic surprise. Mark Burles and Abram N. Shulsky, *Patterns in China's Use of Force: Evidence from History and Doctrinal Writings* (Santa Monica, CA: RAND, 2000), vii-xii, 8, 10, and Friedberg, *A Contest for Supremacy*, 248.

United States, China has shown a propensity to strike in order to inflict psychological-political shock. As Lt Col Lawrence Sullivan reasoned, “Chinese decisions for the use of force have been rational, risk-aware, and made in response to a changing security environment as influenced by a Chinese appreciation of its history.”³⁶ China’s past tendency to strike for psychological-political shock only raises the risk of great power war. This is because China may strike in order to gain the positive effects of a surprise attack as the power imbalance slowly shifts to be more favorable to the PLA.

History of Repeated Crisis

Nationalist passions, territorial disputes, and arms races make the western Pacific ripe for a traditional great power conflict between America and China, which has the potential for military violence. China’s military modernization program has occurred amid a series of provocations between the United States, its allies, and China. These provocations came after China viewed the US military’s success in the 1991 Gulf War as a wake-up call to its own relatively lower military state of readiness. America and China have had a series of unnerving interactions: the Taiwan Straits Crisis (1996), the Chinese embassy bombing (1996), a US EP-3 plane collision with a Chinese fighter jet (2001), and China’s assertiveness in the East and South China Seas over territorial disputes with US allies (2011-ongoing).

The Taiwan Straits Crisis of 1996 showed post-Cold War America that China could be a potential adversary. Taiwan had its first democratic presidential election that year, and China had a vested interest in the outcome of the election because Taiwan poses a threat to Chinese identity.³⁷ During the election, China launched training

³⁶ Lt Col Lawrence Sullivan, “Teaching Bitter Lessons: China’s Use of Force in Territorial Disputes, 1962-1988,” (SAASS Thesis, Maxwell AFB, AL: School of Advanced Air and Space Studies), 1.

³⁷ Friedberg, *A Contest for Supremacy*, 96-97.

missiles into the Taiwan Strait, apparently to undercut the campaign of a pro-independent Taiwan presidential candidate.³⁸ In response, the United States sailed two carrier battle groups into the area to signal US support for Taiwan. “Adding further gravity to the situation were reports of thinly veiled warnings from Chinese officials that they were prepared to risk a nuclear exchange with the United States, and to endure millions of casualties” to stop Taiwanese independence.³⁹ The Taiwan Straits Crisis of 1996 helped underscore for China the humiliating reality that it could not stop US power projection near its borders. This acted as a catalyst for China to develop anti-access capacity, and highlighted the potential to both sides of a US-Chinese conflict.⁴⁰

The bombing of the Chinese embassy in 1999 by a US B-2 bomber shook the Sino-American relationship. While America apologized for the tactical mistake, Chinese citizens were “united in their outrage at what was assumed to be another demonstration of American disrespect for China’s sovereignty.”⁴¹ First, hundreds and then thousands of Chinese citizens staged a protest outside the US embassy in China.⁴²

Then CCP General Secretary, Jiang Zemin, held an emergency Politburo meeting that illustrated the Chinese outrage. Jiang presumed that the air attack was a US coordinated plot to “ascertain the strength of China’s reaction to international crises and conflicts and especially to sudden incidents,”⁴³ and Li Peng, the second-highest-ranking member of the Standing Committee of the Politburo, added, “This incident, more

³⁸ Friedberg, *A Contest for Supremacy*, 97.

³⁹ Friedberg, *A Contest for Supremacy*, 97.

⁴⁰ Friedberg, *A Contest for Supremacy*, 218.

⁴¹ Secretary of State Madeleine Albright, accompanied by the Deputy Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, went to the Chinese Embassy in Washington to apologize as soon as she heard the news. President Clinton also publicly apologized for the tragic mistake. Kissinger, *On China*, 477, and Michael Pillsbury, *The Hundred-Year Marathon: China’s Secret Strategy to Replace America as the Global Superpower*, (New York, NY: Henry Holt and Company, 2015), Apple iBook.

⁴² Pillsbury, *The Hundred-Year Marathon*, Apple iBook.

⁴³ Pillsbury, *The Hundred-Year Marathon*, Apple iBook.

than anything else, reminds us that the United States is an enemy.”⁴⁴ Similar to the early twentieth-century notion that war was inevitable, Li Lanqing, the vice premier, felt that “in the future, direct confrontation between China and the United States will be unavoidable!”⁴⁵

China was not alone in its bellicose language. Chinese outrage coincided with the US argument that “China needed to be faced down.”⁴⁶ These two perspectives show the potential for confrontation and that neither side could control the outcome of every interaction.⁴⁷

A US Navy EP-3 and a Chinese J-8II fighter jet collided in 2001 roughly 70 miles off Hainan Island in the South China Sea.⁴⁸ The PLAAF jet crashed into the sea, and the pilot died.⁴⁹ The EP-3 made an emergency landing on Hainan Island, and the crew was taken into custody for 12 days by Chinese authorities.⁵⁰ China eventually returned the EP-3, albeit in pieces, and charged the United States one million US dollars for keeping the EP-3 crew for 12 days.⁵¹

There are two sides to this story, and the United States and China dispute most of the incident’s details. One thing both sides can agree on is the crash occurred over in the Chinese economic exclusion zone (EEZ).⁵² China eschewed blame and attempted to spin news coverage toward the threat posed by the United States in the Asian Pacific region.⁵³ America saw a formulated response by Chinese officials. “Beijing sought to shape acceptable US responses, place the onus for action on Washington and persuade international audiences that China

⁴⁴ Pillsbury, *The Hundred-Year Marathon*, Apple iBook.

⁴⁵ Pillsbury, *The Hundred-Year Marathon*, Apple iBook.

⁴⁶ Kissinger, *On China*, 478.

⁴⁷ Kissinger, *On China*, 478.

⁴⁸ Halper, *China*, 74

⁴⁹ Halper, *China*, 74

⁵⁰ Halper, *China*, 74.

⁵¹ Halper, *China*, 74.

⁵² Halper, *China*, 75.

⁵³ Halper, *China*, 76.

was, in fact, the victim.”⁵⁴ Throughout the crisis, China attempted to test the reactions of the international community to what it deemed infractions to its sovereignty claims.⁵⁵

In 2013, China created an ADIZ over the East China Sea. The United States viewed China’s ADIZ as international airspace, publicly renouncing China’s claim, and flying B-52s through the ADIZ (see Figure 5). The United States did not want China to create a new international norm that limited freedom of navigation. Because the ADIZ was over the Senkaku Islands, the Chinese ADIZ also aimed to limit Japan’s territorial claims.



Figure 5: China’s ADIZ

Source: Thom Shanker, “U.S. Sends Two B-52 Bombers Into Air Zone Claimed by China,” *New York Times*, 26 Nov 2013, http://www.nytimes.com/2013/11/27/world/asia/us-flies-b-52s-into-chinas-expanded-air-defense-zone.html?_r=0.

Moreover, China’s manufactured islands in the South China Sea are an attempt to redraw the PRC’s sovereign borders. China sees the South China Sea as a strategic geographic point. Conversely, the United States supports the status quo and maintains its stance that the South China Sea is part of international waters. To drive the point home, the US Navy has sailed ships near Chinese island-building operations and

⁵⁴ Halper, *China*, 81.

⁵⁵ Halper, *China*, 81.

has flown US military planes near the construction as well. All this creates on-going tensions between the United States and China with no abatement in sight. The potential for miscalculation in the ongoing dispute is fertile ground for great power war.

China views these animosity-building incidents as a continuation of its “Century of Humiliation.” Historians typically view China’s “Century of Humiliation” as lasting from approximately 1839 to 1945, when foreign countries extracted significant concessions and territory from the Chinese government.⁵⁶ The PRC considers today’s global system as a continuation of this humiliation because of “unequal treaties imposed on them by the Western powers and Japan, and based on what they regard as inappropriate legal concepts.”⁵⁷ China’s modern day anti-access military posture can be seen as a result of this continuation of disputes. China would not have invested in its anti-access weapon systems to dispute US and its allies’ power projection capabilities within the region if it did not perceive a threat in the nearby waters following a long pattern of repeated crises.⁵⁸

China’s attempt to create an ADIZ also involves on-going disputes with its neighbors. The maritime dispute with Japan over the Senkaku Islands is one possible trigger point for future conflict. China is also involved in active disputes with the Philippines and Vietnam over territory in the South China Sea. The uncertainty surrounding the status of Taiwanese statehood is another source of tension in the region.

In sum, while significantly less violent than many of the pre-WWI crises, a series of disputes has raised the animosity between the United States and its allies vis-à-vis China to levels that increase the likelihood

⁵⁶ Dr. Michael Kraig, “Managed Competition in the 21st Century Asia Pacific: Identity, Sovereign Autonomy, and Globalized Wealth” (working paper, Maxwell AFB, AL, 2015), 22.

⁵⁷ Halper, *China*, 457.

⁵⁸ Sam J. Tangredi, *Anti-Access Warfare: Countering A2/AD Strategies* (Annapolis, MD: Naval Institute Press, 2013), 72.

of war. Although no party wishes to start a conventional military confrontation over these disputes, the risk of escalation and miscalculation stemming from a string of repeated crises is possible. Both China and the United States recognize they are strategic competitors, and both states must remain cognizant where an escalation of hardline stances could lead. As of today, it is unclear which of the two great powers is willing to cede power over on-going disputes that link directly to national aims. Repeated friction between the United States and China echoes pre-WWI dynamics. When continued contentious situations come to interconnect, antagonism can increase and raise the risk of great power war.

Entangling Alliances

Both China and the United States have tight ties to smaller powers in the Asia-Pacific. These ties assure allies, but they can also produce the dangerous downside of entanglement. This section discusses some of these alliance relationships.

The United States has various bi-lateral agreements with Asian states. Arguably, one of the most important of these is the US-Taiwanese relationship. Congress passed the Taiwan Relations Act in 1979, and this agreement was more than a symbolic gesture during the Cold War when the United States did not want to be seen by the international community as abandoning Taiwan, an anti-communist state. The act “made clear that, at least as far as Congress was concerned, ‘the United States expected Taiwan to remain separate from the mainland and under US protection for the foreseeable future.’”⁵⁹ The US-Taiwanese relationship caused China to denounce the United States for interfering in its “internal affairs,” and some argue the close relationship with Taiwan prevented the formation of a Sino-American strategic alliance.⁶⁰

⁵⁹ Friedberg, *A Contest for Supremacy*, 81.

⁶⁰ Friedberg, *A Contest for Supremacy*, 83-86.

Under today's Taiwanese alliance, the United States provides Taiwan with military armaments and a pledge to help defend Taiwan from attack.

The United States has a similar bilateral security agreement with Japan. While the United States and Japan negotiated alterations in the US-Japanese Mutual Defense Treaty, a constant feature in the relationship has been an American security guarantee to Japan.⁶¹ Tensions between China and Japan could easily ensnare the United States. For example, the 2010 Senkaku Boat Collision Incident involved a Japanese boat and a Chinese trawler that quickly had strategic implications.⁶² As a result, Japan detained a Chinese merchant captain and his crew over the incident. After the collision, "China enacted a two-month unofficial ban on exports of rare earth [metals] to Japan."⁶³ Following the ban, Japan released the trawler crew; however, the long history of conflict does not seem to have weakened over time between Japan and China.⁶⁴

The United States also has an alliance with the Philippines, and the 1952 US-Philippines Mutual Defense Treaty is still in effect.⁶⁵ The Philippines have had on-going disagreements with China over the nine-dash line since at least 2003.⁶⁶ Aggressive Chinese territorial claims have not waned and if the trend continues, could plunge the Philippines and the Chinese into an unresolvable disagreement. If this leads to military action, the United States will come to the defense the Philippines as part of the mutual defense treaty between the two nations.

⁶¹ Friedberg, *A Contest for Supremacy*, 104.

⁶² Timothy A. Walton, "China's Three Warfares," *Delex Special Report Brief* (Herndon, VA: Delex Systems Inc., 2012), 5.

⁶³ Walton, "China's Three Warfares," 5.

⁶⁴ David C. Kang, *China Rising: Peace, Power, and Order in East Asia* (New York, NY: Columbia University Press, 2007), 170-171.

⁶⁵ Edward N. Luttwak, *The Rise of China Vs. The Logic of Strategy* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2012), 198.

⁶⁶ Luttwak, *The Rise of China*, 198, 293n3.

China's increasingly assertive stance on territorial disputes in the East and South China Sea and the US insistence upon normative rules of engagement between nations erodes regional stability and generates US-Sino tension (see Figure 6). China argues its South China Sea nine-dash line is an international fact, a point punctuated by Chinese refusal to allow international arbitrators determine the veracity of its claims. China advances its claims with a form of legal warfare that is called legal layering, which is an overlapping and rotating set of arguments with different justifications.

If one of the arguments fails, then the next argument fills any gap to promote policy objectives. The Chinese nine-dash line argument relies on historical maps that showed the line, so it believes China has a historic title over the region. If this argument fails, the PRC leadership moves to ancient fishing and administrative exercise over the waters. If this does not persuade, then the PRC moves to sovereignty claims over relevant waters. Now that China has moved toward building man-made islands in the region, it has a more relevant claim that did not exist before, according to UNCLOS. For Americans, the problem with this type of argumentation is that it pits China against a number of US allies who have similar claims. The friction heats up quickly when China prevents unhindered freedom of navigation.

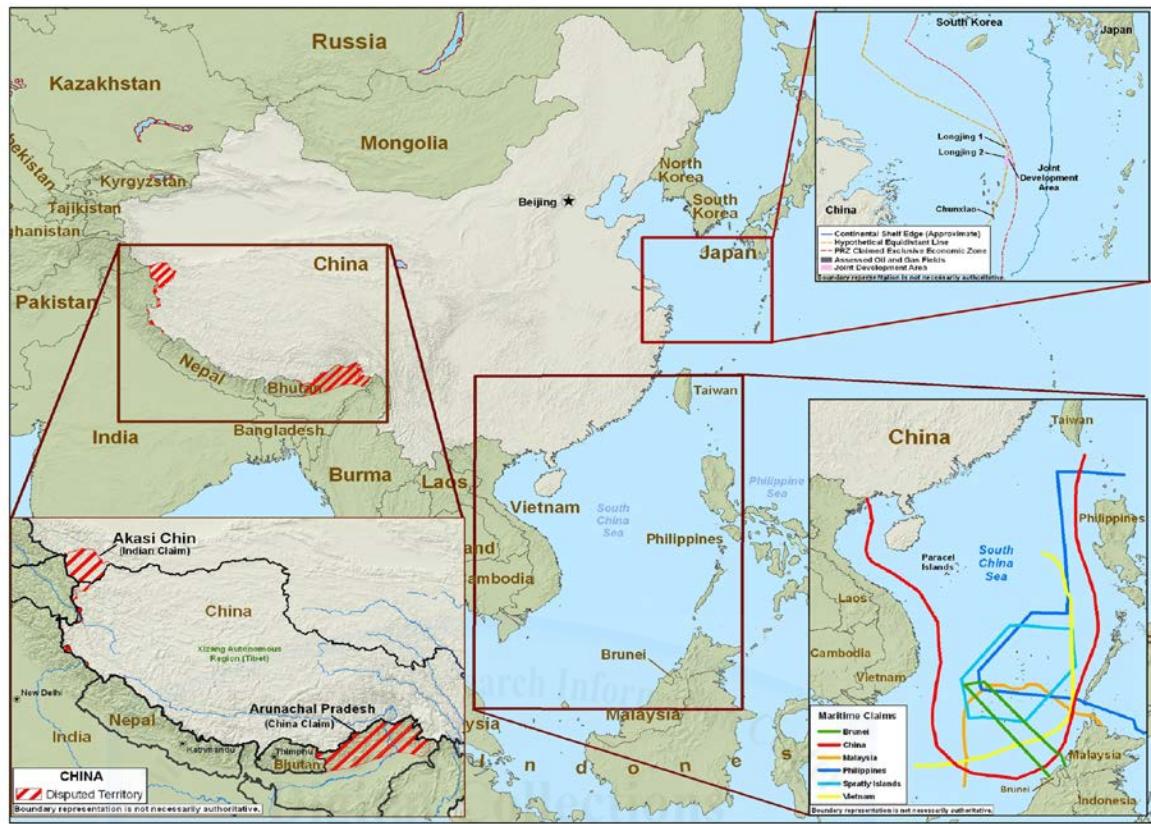


Figure 6: China's Disputed Territories⁶⁷

Source: The University of Texas Libraries, "China Disputed Territories," http://www.lib.utexas.edu/maps/middle_east_and_asia/china_disputed_territories_2009.jpg

And then there is South Korea, a long-time US ally, though South Korea has normalized relations with China.⁶⁸ "In the course of a decade and a half, China has grown to become the largest consumer of South Korean exports and the leading destination for its investment capital."⁶⁹ At the same time, South Korea and nuclear-armed North Korea are still

⁶⁷ This map does not show all of the Chinese disputes, but it provides a spatial perspective on the three major ongoing territorial disputes. The disputes stem from shared borders with India and Bhutan, the South China Sea, and with Japan in the East China Sea. The University of Texas Libraries, "China Disputed Territories," http://www.lib.utexas.edu/maps/middle_east_and_asia/china_disputed_territories_2009.jpg

⁶⁸ Luttwak, *The Rise of China*, 169.

⁶⁹ Friedberg, *A Contest for Supremacy*, 209.

legally at war since neither signed a peace treaty in 1953. China remains North Korea's most powerful ally and it has not shown any intent in discouraging North Korea's nuclear program. In fact, the Chinese may "actually be using commercial penetration to establish a buffer zone and virtual colony in the portions of the North directly opposite its borders."⁷⁰ In 2010, when North Korea sank the South Korean navy ship *Cheonan*, killing 46 South Korean sailors, China was reluctant to criticize or sanction North Korea.⁷¹ With constant threats and a series of repeated crises between the two Koreas, a miscalculation or escalatory move is not out of the realm of possible, which could also lead to US-China entanglement.

These regional states and their prominent allies be they US, or Chinese, could instigate the environment for great power war, much like that of the July 1914 crisis. Regional actors, not unlike great powers in some cases, have a tendency to draw on prestige and national identity to promote their side of a dispute.⁷² This "honor" can force hardened positions, sharpen animosity, and increase the likelihood of great power entanglement into war.⁷³

Conclusion

The PRC has the advantage of watching from the sidelines as the United States continues to wage war across the globe. The PRC has studied the American way of war, and while they have contempt for American arrogance, Chinese leaders fear facing US conventional forces. With a strong US presence in the Pacific theater, China had little choice but to modernize its military. The PRC contends that it must contest intolerable foreign policies by the United States, and the only way to challenge is with a strong military and the ability to slowly revise

⁷⁰ Friedberg, *A Contest for Supremacy*, 210.

⁷¹ Friedberg, *A Contest for Supremacy*, 210.

⁷² Ja Ian Chong and Todd H. Hall, "The Lessons of 1914 for East Asia Today: Missing the Trees for the Forest," *International Security* 39, no. 1 (Summer 2014): 42.

⁷³ Chong and Hall, "The Lesson of 1914 for East Asia Today," 42.

international norms to advance Chinese interests. Thus, US-Chinese competition appears inevitable. This rivalry does not mean war is inevitable; however, at a minimum, a competitive relationship exists between the United States and China with factors signaling the potential for violence. American and Chinese leaders will require herculean efforts and strong political will in order to avoid a great power war. However, a better comprehension of factors that increase the risk of war can aid leaders to manage differences appropriately and avert violence.⁷⁴



⁷⁴ Chong and Hall, “The Lesson of 1914 for East Asia Today,” 42.

Chapter 3

German Apples Compared to Mandarin Oranges

History doesn't repeat itself, but it does rhyme.

Mark Twain

This thesis started with a fundamental question: Is great power war approaching? Academics and political leaders endlessly debate this issue, just as decision-makers did in 1914. Similar to 1914, people made the argument that economic interdependence or the costs of war would prevent great powers employing military violence to solve their disagreements, yet fighting occurred.¹ Today, the same arguments exist regarding why great power war will not happen, which then leads to more questions. Are the United States and China destined to repeat previous great power rivals? Will today's alliance networks drag great powers into World War III over territorial disputes just as conflicts in the Balkans did in 1914? This paper looked for insights into all these questions by utilizing a four-variable analysis.

Four-Variable Framework

Hegemonic Challenger

The similarities between Imperial Germany and China's present-day rise remain striking. Both acquired more power, wealth, and military might that narrowed the gap between a hegemon and a challenger. The narrowing of this gap and the challenger's revisionist tendencies increased the risk of great power war.

Both Imperial Germany and today's Communist China have exhibited significant increases in wealth and military might. Imperial

¹ See Norman Angell's *The Great Illusion* for economic interdependence arguments against the feasibility of a European war and Ivan Bloch's *Is War Now Impossible* for discussions on the immense costs of war should preclude political leaders from initiating military violence.

Germany surpassed Britain's share of European wealth in 1903. Likewise, China's GDP (PPP) passed the US GDP in 2014, narrowing the economic gap with the United States. Additionally, Imperial Germany's military gained a qualitative advantage over its rivals regarding training and weapon modernization. While the PLA does not have a qualitative advantage over the US military, the PLA, with its advanced double-digit SAM systems and fifth-generation aircraft, certainly has entered into the "near-peer" category relative to the US military.

Imperial Germany's increase in naval power posed a challenge for Great Britain's freedom of navigation just as China's anti-access network and naval threats challenge today's freedom of navigation through global commons, especially in the South China Sea. England, being an island nation, saw a threat to its naval dominance as a potential threat to its sea-reliant economy. Similarly, the United States sees freedom of navigation as an international law that it must protect for itself and its allies. Thus, Germany threatened Britain's hegemony in 1914, and China threatens US influence today.

The revisionist tendencies are the most dangerous aspect of a hegemonic challenger. In the 1900s, German leaders sought its "place in the sun" and expansion of its political influence. Germany's expansion threatened the European status quo, something that England desperately wanted to maintain. This friction point between Germany and England led to an increase in fear, contributing to the subsequent hostile actions between the European great powers.

Likewise, China appears willing to subvert the status quo that benefits the United States. China's actions in the South China Sea and various non-violent forms of warfare, which scholars dubbed the "Three Warfares," show China as a country uncomfortable with what it sees as US interference in the Asia-Pacific region. This friction point between China and the United States is of concern because it increases the risk of great power war.

While a hegemonic challenger is an obvious prerequisite for great power war, the larger takeaway is what characteristics make the label “hegemonic challenger” appropriate. State leadership can say they do not have hegemonic aspirations, but that does not mean the state is not a potential hegemon. Analysts should label a state a hegemonic challenger based on how a state utilizes its growing military and economic power. The question a decision-maker must ask is whether a state is taking revisionist actions to alter international norms. If the answer is “yes,” then the state should consider its rival a hegemonic challenger. Thus, if a state takes revisionist actions to upset the status quo that the current hegemon enjoys, then the risk for great power war increases.

Power Imbalance

Like 1914, the capacity to wage great power war and the reasons to do so appear to be moving away from peace. Germany believed it could win a quick, decisive war in 1914. It came dangerously close to winning, but the war was clearly not quick or decisive. Leaders have learned that great power war will not be quick or decisive against a near-peer adversary. Therefore, a power imbalance containing many uncertainties could potentially avert war.

Unlike the Imperial German belief that Germany could win a great power war, the ambiguity in who would win a great power war between the United States and China keeps disputes below the threshold of military violence. RAND’s 2015 report called *The US-China Military Scorecard* highlights this concept. China is trending toward military parity, which makes the advancement of national interest through violence uncertain for both China and the United States.² When the costs of war are unclear, the risk decreases for an outbreak of violence.

² Eric Heginbotham et al., *The U.S.-China Military Scorecard: Forces, Geography, and the Evolving Balance of Power, 1996-2017* (Santa Monica, CA: RAND, 2015), 68, 93, 131, 151, 199, 224, 241, 257, 282, 317.

No country wants to begin a war that it does not think could advance its political aims.

The uncertainty surrounding a definitive cost-benefit analysis could be the most important factor that is stopping a current great power war between the United States and China. Because of the sheer complexity of a modern-day war between two nuclear-armed superpowers, the cost-benefit analysis for both sides appears incalculable. There are too many unknown unknowns in the war that make the highest echelon political leaders on both sides unlikely to initiate any action that would warrant a significant combative response.

Following this logic, operations that slowly advance PRC interests is the most likely strategy that the United States can expect China to take in the near future. China does not want to risk CCP viability and endanger its sovereignty. Therefore, China will probably take actions to alter the strategic environment in a manner that makes military employment irrational, following its Three Warfares strategy.

If China could guarantee a quick, decisive military victory against the United States, then history may rhyme. In the past, China has shown a propensity to initiate military invasion—particularly over territorial disputes—to gain the advantage of a surprise attack. China would most likely attempt a surprise attack if it saw a comparative advantage that would only last for a finite period. Gaining insight from 1914, Germany believed its comparative advantage would only last for a finite amount of time due to Russia's paralleled growth in military power. Therefore, Germany initiated its Schlieffen Plan because German military leaders believed they may not have a chance to do so in the future. Today, with China's trend towards military parity, PRC leaders may believe they have regional comparative advantage in military power—an advantage that would most likely be for a finite period due to US presence. Given China's history of surprise attack, Chinese rivals should use caution concerning a future surprise attack.

Paradoxically, the ambiguity in who would win a great power war using kinetic means between the United States and China makes it more likely that China will seek non-kinetic forms of warfare for PRC interests. Whether the PRC continues its claims for territory, cyber espionage against US companies, or “Three Warfares,” China will attempt avert a conventional military response by the United States. As long as China can advance its interest without using military force, then the initiation of military violence will not take place. The paradox for the United States is that it does not want a great power war because war could destabilize the international order. However, US decision-makers must determine how they would allow a potential hegemon to subvert international norms without initiating military force for US national interests.

History of Repeated Crises

Historical crises in the years leading up to WWI created an environment of tension, which is also evident in today’s US-China relationship. Disputes, crises, and violence plagued the European nations during the lead up to WWI. Not one event, in particular, stands out as the crisis that caused the First World War. However, the cumulative effect of multiple disputes and wars created perceptions that tension would not decrease without military force. As each crisis occurred, the early twentieth-century leaders felt insulted and outraged, and mistrust and fear between rivals grew. In today’s US-China relationship, a series of disputes has created similar animosity. Unresolved disputes and mistrust in the western Pacific region are continual. Standoffs between the PRC and US allies are not a rare occurrence anymore and are indicative of great power war risk.

There is a large gap in how people perceive the US-China relationship. Some see the economic benefits from trade and foresee peace in the future. However, the history of repeated disputes between the two states has created mistrust and friction. With distrust comes pessimism over the future. PRC leadership may see diplomacy as a lost

cause if continual disputes over territory do not cease. Looking back at the First World War, German leaders felt pessimistic about their ability to advance national interests after it was demonstrated repeatedly in disputes that diplomacy would not work. As disputes further aggravate actors without providing resolution, the risk for great power war increases.

Entangling Alliances

In 1914 and today, alliance commitments increase the risk of great power war. Strategic partnerships make countries take on commitments that increase the probability of great power war. There are many benefits to security agreements, but war is a definite drawback to such security commitments.

In 1914, the outbreak of violence and alliance commitments necessitated great powers involve themselves in conflict. The First World War would have looked completely different without the security commitments that were in place, which all but guaranteed the entrance of the various allies into the war. The same types of security dependencies that existed in 1914 increase the risk of great power war today in the Asia-Pacific region. As the number of US military security commitments increase, the flash points capable of bringing the United States into a great power war increases.

While security partnerships are not necessarily a strategic weakness, they do increase the risk of great power war. Admittedly, great power war is far more complicated than any single factor. However, the combined four variables deliver a compelling evidentiary basis for increased great power war risk.

Problems with this Analogy

The commonalities between WWI and US-China today do not make the analogy between the two periods necessarily sufficient evidence for the duplication of WWI today. This paper argues that the risk of great power war is currently increased, but this does not mean that a repeat of WWI will happen. In fact, fundamental differences regarding nuclear weapons, the international order, and geography between the two periods make an exact replication of the past highly unlikely.

Nuclear Weapons

While technology and new weaponry certainly played a factor in WWI, nuclear weapons were not a factor. Both China and the United States have nuclear weapons that significantly change the cost-benefit analysis of going to war. As Thomas Schelling wrote in his 1966 book, *Arms and Influence*, with nuclear weapons, the logic of violence in strategy changed from the efficient use of force to a potential use.³ Nuclear powers cannot ignore the possibility of escalating warfare from limited to unlimited warfare. Indeed, the very existence of nuclear weapons makes their use inescapable in “go to war” calculations. If nuclear weapons were ever to be employed by a state, hopefully, it would use its nuclear weapons in a limited capacity.

As Schelling wrote as recently as 2014, the world must hope that if nuclear weapons were ever to be employed by any country in future wars, the state employing these destructive weapons would restrain its employment.⁴ Some possible ways to constrain the use of nuclear weapons include limits on “numbers of weapons, explosive yields, delivery means, targets selected, geographical areas, offensive or defensive use, advanced warnings, height of bursts, and direct response

³ Thomas C. Schelling, *Arms and Influence* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2008), 1-34.

⁴ Thomas C. Schelling, “Foreword,” in *On Limited Nuclear War in the 21st Century*, ed. Jeffrey A. Larsen et al. (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2014), xi-xiii.

to enemy action.”⁵ In 1914, great powers of Europe did not have to consider these nuclear factors, but the uncertainty of nuclear escalation today is clearly a fundamental change to war calculations, making any direct prescriptions from 1914 to today problematic.

However, nuclear weapons will not stop war between two states, but they fundamentally change a state’s calculated employment of military force for political gains. A relatively recent example of two nuclear states going to war occurred during the 1999 Kargil War between India and Pakistan.⁶ The Kargil War stayed conventional, but a state cannot assume that a future war between nuclear powers will remain conventional, especially if national survival is at risk. If national survival is in danger, nuclear weapons may be introduced into war by a nuclear-armed state, such as the United States or China. Employment of nuclear arms is a possibility.

Deterrence concepts have emerged from this nuclear weapon dilemma, which the 1914 European states did not have to consider.⁷ At its core, deterrence raises the costs much higher than the benefits produced by an initiative, which will then deter state from initiating an act of aggression against its opponent.⁸ Even though nuclear weapons do not preclude war, they do fundamentally alter a state’s calculus for initiating military violence.

A Different International Order

Over the centuries, states have risen and fallen and will continue to do so. With the ebb and flow of power, sequential hegemons emerge. Hegemons establish order in various ways, and the 1914 hierarchy was

⁵ Schelling, “Foreword,” xii.

⁶ Benjamin S. Lambeth, *Airpower at 18,000: The Indian Air Force in the Kargil War* (Washington, DC: Carnegie Endowment, 2012), 1-2.

⁷ Bernard Brodie, *Strategy in the Missile Age* (Santa Monica, CA: RAND, 1959), viii.

⁸ T.V. Paul, *Complex Deterrence: Strategy in the Global Age* (Chicago, IL: The University of Chicago Press, 2009), 5-6.

different from the one existing today.⁹ The liberal character of the post-WWII US-led system is not only distinct from the pre-WWI order, but there are implications for the incentives and constraints that confront a present-day rising power.¹⁰

The strategic setting in 1914 did not include any overarching liberal international organization and exhibited the logic of Hobbesian anarchy. Survival depended on military force for the great powers. That environment did not mean that states would be in continual war, but it did mean, “war may quite literally ‘at any moment occur.’”¹¹ At the time, leaders tended to “overestimate the hostility of neighboring states; this paranoia eventually produced its own reality by justifying aggressive policies that provoked genuine hostility.”¹² In this Hobbesian logic, a revisionist state confronted international norms largely through military force.¹³

Today’s international order has liberal characteristics at its core, and in this hierarchical system, it is unlikely that the United States or China fear the loss of basic sovereignty by military force, as the WWI great powers might have felt. The United States formulated today’s international order after the Second World War.¹⁴ At the international order’s core is the ability to join the order with ease and the difficulty in overturning it.¹⁵ In this order, revisionist states such as China “are not fully embedded in the liberal international order, but they nonetheless

⁹ G. John Ikenberry, *Power, Order, and Change in World Politics* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2014), 7.

¹⁰ Ikenberry, *Power, Order, and Change in World Politics*, 14-15.

¹¹ Alexander Wendt, *Social Theory of International Politics* (Cambridge University Press, 1999), 265.

¹² Stephen Van Evera, “The Cult of the Offensive and the Origins of the First World War,” *International Security* 9, no. 1 (Summer 1984), 81, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/2538636>.

¹³ Wendt, *Social Theory of International Politics*, 270.

¹⁴ G. John Ikenberry, *Liberal Leviathan: The Origins, Crisis, and Transformation of the American World Order* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2011), 7.

¹⁵ Ikenberry, *Liberal Leviathan*, 9.

profit from its existence.”¹⁶ There are incentives for Chinese integration in the international order, such as continued economic growth. Even with these incentives, however, China appears bent on changing an international order it sees as contrary to its interest. However, it may not do so with force and violence.

Today’s system relies more on Lockean logic. In a Lockean environment, states treat each other as rivals instead of enemies.¹⁷ This logic does not preclude violence in disputes, but it does espouse the notion that states have the right to sovereignty.¹⁸ Because China and the United States both benefit from the open-market system endorsed by today’s international order, the Hobbesian prescriptions for violence are less pronounced than they were in 1914.

Geography

Geography between the two examples is vastly different. Before World War I, Great Britain was the great power with an expansive reign of territories and was relatively comfortable in its hegemony. Conversely, Germany felt encircled by its neighbors, France, and Russia, who entered into a Dual Alliance. The Franco-Russo agreement meant Germany faced a potential two-front war, which led to the Schlieffen Plan, timetables, and mobilization, all which helped shaped the coming of First World War.

The US-China geographical relationship is vastly different in regards to fear of homeland defense. China does not have bordering countries capable of mounting a threat similar to the threat the Imperial German government felt. Even with US forces stationed in the Asian-Pacific Region, the Pacific Ocean provides a buffer between the continental United States and China. The sea provides great distance today; a condition that did not exist for Imperial Germany. Admittedly,

¹⁶ Ikenberry, *Liberal Leviathan*, 9.

¹⁷ Wendt, *Social Theory of International Politics*, 279.

¹⁸ Wendt, *Social Theory of International Politics*, 280.

the PLA or the United States could attempt cyber attacks. While cyber attacks could be detrimental to power grids or financial markets, cyber weapons tend to fall into three distinct categories—sabotage, espionage, or subversion.¹⁹ National survival fears over cyber-inflicted damage are minimal in these circumstances; states survive cyber attacks.

In sum, these differences make it less likely that the July Crisis will replay itself in the same manner, but the US-Chinese relationship exhibits warning signs for great power war. The four-variable model does allow insight on what increases and decreases the risk of great power war. The following section provides some of these insights.

Principle Findings

First, revisionist actions are the most important element necessary to label a hegemonic challenger, albeit, the most difficult. In this light, a state should not rely on the rhetoric of its rivals to determine if revisionist tendencies exist. A state needs to determine if a state is currently attempting to change the international order—a task easier said than done. Some scholars have gone so far as to measure leadership travel to calculate whether China is a revisionist state or not.²⁰

Instead of trying to empirically calculate whether China is a revisionist or not, strategists should judge PRC actions as they relate to international norms. For instance, China’s man-made island building in the South China Sea seeks a new precedent that manipulates international law, attempting to create a *fait accompli*. In this manner, China can rightly hold the label of a revisionist state who seeks to revise international norms slowly to advance PRC interests.

¹⁹ Thomas Rid, *Cyber War Will Not Take Place* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2013), xiv, 113, 128-131.

²⁰ Scott L. Kastner and Phillip C. Saunders, “Is China a Status Quo or Revisionist State? Leadership Travel as an Empirical Indicator of Foreign Policy Priorities,” *International Studies Quarterly* 56, March 2012, 165.

Second, the current power imbalance dictates that China will continue to subvert US interests with actions PRC leaders calculate will not trip a US military response. The dominance of the US military in conventional war has taught rivals to seek asymmetric strategies to advance their political interests. China has learned this lesson well.

Third, there are two interconnected reasons why the risk of a great power war increases due to a power asymmetry element in the Asia-Pacific region. One, the United States seeks countermeasures to stop China from using non-kinetic means to advance PRC interest. If China's non-kinetic approach for gaining territory, resources, and influence fails, then the risk of great power war increases. Two, if China calculates an accurate cost-benefit calculation that shows China can win a war against the United States, then great power war is more likely to occur between the two states. Both of these factors occurred with Imperial Germany and serve as cautions for today's decision-makers.

Fourth, if a country develops a reputation for mistrust stemming from repeated disputes, the risk of war increases. States tend to cooperate when there is a belief of mutually advantageous self-interested collaboration. Mistrust directly affects this relationship. In both WWI and today's US-China relationship, leaders began to look at their rivals as enemies. Once states damage a partnership, the effects extend throughout the social and political system of the states over time. Imperial Germany thought it would never be able to reverse this effect. While there are beneficial interactions between the United States and China, there is no denying the possible outcomes regarding ongoing disputes.

Fifth, while several aspects point towards the increased risk of great power war, entangling alliances seem are the most likely spark for great power war in today's strategic reality. Alliances increase a state's interests beyond its own. For example, there are no US-only reasons why the Senkaku Islands are a national interest. However, Japanese

leadership holds the uninhabited islands very dear. Alliance-level interests convolute the art of compromise and bargaining. If Japan will not compromise over the Senkaku Islands, then the United States has little to no room to bargain politically over the territory. As such, bargaining failures, such as the ones that occurred during the 1914 July Crisis, could once again trigger great power war.

Sixth, the analogy between World War I and the US-China relationship is not perfect. Analogies can become dangerous for many reasons; one reason is the availability heuristic. People tend to judge the probability of events by how easy it is to think of comparative examples (usually recent ones) to help make sense of a complex situation. Since there are not many modern examples of great power war, it is easy to pick the first modern day great power war as a comparison. There are various differences between the contexts, which strategists must acknowledge and understand. However, the insight gained by the analogy does provide crucial strategic insight. Most importantly, the analogy provides evidence of an increased risk of great power war.

Chapter 4

Conclusion

If we could first know where we are, and whither we are tending, we could then better judge what to do, and how to do it.

Abraham Lincoln

Review

There is a current tension on whether great power war is approaching. This thesis started with this very question: is great power war approaching? This issue is similar to the pre-WWI debates stating that economic interdependence and the destructive costs of military violence are too high to have a great power war in modern times. Using this discussion as a springboard, this thesis sought to explore the concept of great power war using a four-factor framework comprised of a hegemonic challenger, a power imbalance, a history of repeated crises, and entangling alliances.

The four factors tie multiple strands of realism together to help determine if China is likely to rise peacefully or violently and uses a comparative analogy to the First World War to gain insight into this complex issue. The potential rising Chinese threat has some contextual differences—nuclear weapons, a different international order, and geography—that make the WWI analogy imperfect. However, to dismiss the analogy altogether would be throwing out key strategic insights that could help decision-makers potentially avert war.

The four factors used in this analogy are all manifestations of Thucydides' origins of great power war: fear, honor, and interest. The reason for framing the variables in Thucydidean terms is not to argue that war between the United States and China is inevitable. Rather, it is to recognize that if the United States continues on its current strategic vector, then a conflict may approach. Because there is an increased risk of great power war, decision-makers on both sides should deliberately

plan and execute measures that prevent war. Before going into actions that could avoid war, one must comprehend the four-factor framework used in this thesis.

Summary of Four-Factor Framework

Thucydides put forth three items that relate to the origins of war: fear, honor, and interest. The four variables put forth in this thesis are symptoms and consequences of Thucydides' concerns. Realist international relations scholars such as Gilpin, Mearsheimer, and Waltz elaborated upon these concerns in their analyses.

Different realist theories provide a unique approach to conceptualizing international relations. A commonality in realism is that states go to war over one aspect—power. When a state has dominant power, it can ensure its survival. While there are many subsets of the realist perspective, this paper takes the strengths of multiple realist theories to create a unique worldview. The worldview purported in this paper argues that four quantifiable factors help lend perspective to what “power” means to a hegemon and its challengers. The four-factor framework helps distill clarity from today’s complex environment to provide insight to decision-makers.

Conclusion

This paper concludes that there is a high risk of great power war between the United States and China; however, it does not conclude that great power war is inevitable. Even with interdependent economies, the 1914 great powers could not prevent World War I. Today, China and the United States rely on each other as trading partners, but there are enough signposts for conflict that a great power war is not hard to imagine. China’s challenge to US hegemony beckons, dynamic change in the balance of power looms, a history of repeated disputes is evident, and entangling alliances are abundant. As a result, there are plenty of warning signs that the twenty-first century has a reasonable likelihood of great power war. However, there are contextual differences, such as

nuclear weapons, a different international order, and geography. Admittedly, these differences make a direct analogy to 1914 imperfect.

Still, there is a common narrative between the two periods. Imperial Germany sought to “take its place in the sun,” and China is attempting to reverse what it considers a continual humiliation brought about by a US-led international order. The origins of the First World War illustrated that a rising Germany challenged a declining Great Britain. A series of disputes, entangling security commitments, and deteriorating relations between the great powers prompted a security competition. With this high-risk backdrop, the first great power war of modern history engulfed the European nations. The potential exists today for a similar outbreak of great power war in the western Pacific region.

Any remedy to prevent the next great power war should target fear, honor, and interest to relieve the negative symptoms of what President Xi Jinping called the “Thucydidean Trap.”¹ A strategic appreciation that the risk of great power war is present can help seek solutions that avert violence. While the conclusion of this thesis appears highly threatening for peace, peace is still possible.

Principle Lessons

Lesson #1: Beware of Subverting International Norms

A rising power should use extreme caution if it works outside or against current international norms. As Imperial Germany attempted to realize its *Weltpolitik*—its quest to expand to foreign markets, have more colonial possessions, and operate on a broader world arena—it undermined the international norms at the time. Great Britain would not let this subversion happen. Likewise, China currently undermines international norms by curtailing freedom of navigation in the global

¹ President Xi describes a “Thucydidean Trap” as military conflict between China, a rising power, and the United States, an established power, so instability does not disrupt economic prosperity. President Xi Jinping, President of China (address, Berggruen Institute on Governance, Beijing, PRC, 3 November 2015), <http://berggruen.org/activities/79>.

commons. Revisionist actions by the PRC earn it a hegemonic challenger label.

A tag of hegemonic challenger quickly transforms a conceptualization of a state's intention. Hegemonic challengers act as a destabilizer to the global system. As Mearsheimer argued, the United States has never sat idle as a country destabilized the global system. The United States committed itself to resist hegemonic challengers such as Imperial Germany, Imperial Japan, Nazi Germany, and the Soviet Union.² If China continues its revisionist actions, the United States would most likely view the PRC as a hegemonic challenger, thus increasing the risk of great power war.

Lesson #2: The United States Should Prepare to Combat the PRC's Three Warfares Doctrine

Based on indefinite cost-benefit calculations concerning war, there is no reason why China wants to escalate tensions toward employment of conventional military forces. In fact, as long as China continues to achieve PRC interests by non-kinetic means, it will have no reason to stop its actions. Therefore, the United States should prepare to counter the PRC's Three Warfares Doctrine.

One preparation measure that the US military should focus on is freedom of navigation exercises in the global commons. The US military and its allies should routinely utilize international airspace and waters. If the US backs down, then the PRC has revised an international norm. As a word of caution, the US military must avoid a repeat of the EP-3 incident by using strict rules of engagement. Aircraft and naval assets should utilize multi-ship formations that have the ability to video record any interactions that with the PLA. Publicity of positive and negative interactions may promote peace and deter undesirable behavior.

² John J. Mearsheimer, *The Tragedy of Great Power Politics* (New York, NY: W. W. Norton & Company, 2014), 360.

The potential negative effect of this measure is the risk of having repeated disputes. The US military could mitigate this risk by clearly advertising its plans and intentions.³ Unannounced freedom of navigation exercises will most likely lead to uncertainty and fear. Fear causes miscalculation, but the United States can decrease PRC fear with proper strategic messaging.

Lesson #3: Prepare for Allies Pulling the United States into War

The harsh reality of a security commitment is it could lead to war. If the United States is not prepared to enter a war over an alliance, then it should reconsider its obligations. Alliances bring about great responsibility, and the United States must be prepared publicly to endorse its security partnerships with clear strategic messaging and military force. US partners must know that their security is underwritten by the entire might of the US government.

Enacting this lesson strengthens alliances. Allies know exactly where the US stands, and so does the PRC. Any mixed messaging can create uncertainty and insecurity, which may lead to miscalculation. Before WWI, Great Britain's was unclear concerning its level of commitment when discussing the matter with German diplomats. This uncertainty made Germany feel emboldened. As Jervis argued in *Perception and Misperception in International Politics*, people will hear what they want to hear. Today's strategic ambiguity with Taiwan is the most notable seam that the PRC could exploit. Strategic ambiguity could encourage probing by paramilitary forces, which may prove escalatory.⁴

The major danger of strong alliances is great power war. Prior to the August 1914 start of WWI, Germany's blank check to Austria, Russia's commitment to Serbia, and Britain's agreement to Belgium

³ US leaders should publicly denounce measures it sees as supporting the subversive Three Warfares Doctrine.

⁴ Ja Ian Chong and Todd H. Hall, "The Lessons of 1914 for East Asia Today: Missing the Trees for the Forest," *International Security* 39, no. 1 (Summer 2014): 24.

demonstrate how an ally can easily pull a great power into war. Simply stated, local conflicts can quickly pull allies into a great power war. The United States should appropriately message to allies what the US is or is not willing to go to war over. This effort could safeguard against US allies taking unwarranted risk in disputes with the PRC.

Implications

The four-variable framework synthesizes multiple strands of realism into one perspective, but one element—power imbalance—stands out as the most important factor preventing a great power war. Calculating if one great power can advance its national interests through military force against a near peer is extremely ambiguous. Moreover, nuclear weapons increase the complexity of power imbalance considerations.⁵

The four variables offer policy makers another perspective on how states may act in the future without necessarily considering all of the micro-level characteristics, such as domestic governance. This vantage point looks more at the systemic level of international relations to foretell when conflict or war is a more likely outcome. This point of view does not necessary seek to explain why great power war occurs; rather, it offers insight into conditions when war is more likely to occur between great powers.

This paper looked at shifts in power (the rise and decline of great powers in relation to each other) and how it affects international order. These shifts in power relate to economic, military, and national objectives. When all three of these combine, a hegemonic challenger can be easier to identify, particularly if revisionist actions are apparent. A hegemonic challenger will most likely begin to make significant calculations on the costs and benefits of working within the established

⁵ Two nuclear-powered countries have been to war before. During the Kargil War Indian and Pakistan fought a conventional war, but it was a relatively short, limited war.

international order before attempting to revise the system. Currently, it appears that China is attempting to subvert, at a minimum, the current international order.

When one combines all four variables, a strategist can provide a perspective to a leader on why states maintain hardline diplomatic stances. This logic can also work in reverse as well. If a state actor observes hardline stances, then analysts may test these variables against current evidence to provide another perspective for a decision-maker.

Even in the today's nuclear age, the symptoms of Thucydides' origins of great power conflict – fear, honor, and interest – still hold true. States will accept an increased risk of war to drive certain political aims. This perspective, while unashamedly realist, can help indicate why a great power war could occur in this century. When the four variables exist, crisis initiation seems to provide an answer to political problems. Knowing this can provide political leaders a valuable perspective on the risk of war and prepare appropriately.

The United States is not in a historically unique strategic position when it comes to the decline and rise of great powers. Significant shifts in power have been the norm throughout history. By understanding the origins of WWI, current US leaders today can better gauge and anticipate conflict and crisis in US-Sino relations, and perhaps avert World War III.

Future Research

For future study, analysts should test more case studies against this comparative worldview, which has the potential to grow into a theory. In particular, World War II and the Cold War have the potential to show why another great power war started in the former example, and why states averted great power violence in the latter. Significant shifts in power have been the trend throughout history and will continue to happen in the future. Understanding the factors that increase the risk of major war is an important key to any strategist. This perspective could

shed light on blind spots in strategic thinking or raise warning signs of impending conflict.

The United States is not in a historically unique strategic position when it comes to the decline and rise of great powers. Future research in this area should provide greater clarity to war signals. If analysts forewarn conflict, then research into hardline political stances or peaceful engagement can provide additional strategic insight. Admittedly, any effort of future speculation requires a degree of guesswork. However, a look at the past can assuredly provide insight for decision-makers concerning future great power conflict.

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